



The Tartar Steppe

DINO
BUZZATI

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THE TARTAR STEPPE

Translated by
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I

ONE September morning, Giovanni Drogo, being newly commissioned, set out from the city for Fort Bastiani; it was his first posting.

He had himself called while it was still dark and for the first time put on his lieutenant's uniform. When he had done, he looked at himself in the mirror by the light of an oil lamp but failed to find there the expected joy. There was a great silence in the house but from a neighbouring room low noises could be heard; his mother was rising to bid him farewell.

This was the day he had looked forward to for years—the beginning of his real life. He thought of the drab days at the Military Academy, remembered the bitter evenings spent at his books when he would hear people passing in the streets—people who were free and presumably happy, remembered winter reveilles in the icy barrack rooms heavy with the threat of punishment. He recalled the torture of counting one by one the days to which there seemed to be no end.

Now he was an officer at last and need no longer wear himself out over his books nor tremble at the voice of the sergeant; for all that was past. All those days which at the time had seemed so unpleasant were gone forever—gone to form months and years which would never return. Yes, now he was an officer and would have money, pretty women would perhaps look at him, but then—or so it struck him—the best years, his first youth, were probably over. So Drogo gazed at the mirror and saw a forced smile on his face, the face he had sought in vain to love.

How stupid! Why could he not manage to smile in the proper carefree manner while he said goodbye to his mother? Why did he pay no attention to her last injunctions and succeed only in catching the tone of her voice, so familiar and so human? Why did he roam about the room nervously, inconclusively, unable to find his watch, his crop or his cap although they were in their proper places? It wasn't as if he were going off to the wars. At this very moment scores of lieutenants like himself, his former companions, were leaving home amid gay laughter as if they were going to a fiesta. Why did he bring out for his mother nothing but vague, meaningless phrases instead of affectionate, soothing words? It was true that his heart was full with the bitterness of leaving the old house for

the first time—the old house where he had been born and being born had learned to hope—full with the fears which every change brings with it, with emotion at saying goodbye to his mother; but on top of all this there came an insistent thought to which he could not quite give a name but which was like a vague foreboding as if he were about to set out on a journey of no return.

His friend Francesco Vescovi accompanied him on horseback on the first stage of his road. The horses' hooves rang, through the deserted streets. Dawn was breaking, the city was still sunk in sleep; here and there on a top floor a shutter opened, tired faces appeared and listless eyes looked for a moment on the miraculous birth of the sun.

The two friends did not talk. Drogo was wondering what Fort Bastiani would be like but could not imagine it. He did not even know exactly where it was, nor how far he had to go to reach it. Some people had said a day's ride, others less; no one whom he had asked had ever really been there.

At the gates of the city Vescovi began to chat about the usual things as if Drogo were going for a ride in the country. Then suddenly he said:

"Do you see that grassy hill? Yes, that one. Do you see a building on top of it?" he went on. "That's a bit of the Fort, an outwork. I passed it two years ago, I remember, with my uncle, when we were going hunting."

They had left the city now. The fields of maize had begun, the pastures, the red autumnal woods. The pair rode on, side by side, along the white, sun-beaten road. Giovanni and Francesco were old friends, having lived together for years on end, with the same enthusiasms, the same friendships; they had seen each other every day, then Vescovi had got fat but Drogo had become an officer and now he saw how far apart they were. All that easy elegant life was his no longer; what lay in wait for him was serious and unknown. It seemed to him that his horse and Francesco's had already a different gait, that the hoof-beats of his own were less light, less lively, with a suggestion of anxiety and fatigue, as if even the animal felt that life was going to change.

They had reached the brow of a hill. Drogo turned to see the city against the light; the morning smoke rose from the roofs. He picked out the window of his room. Probably it was open. The women were tidying up. They would unmake the bed, shut everything up in a cupboard and then bar the shutters. For months and months no one would enter except the patient dust and, on sunny days, thin streaks of light. There it was, shut up in the dark, the little world of his childhood. His mother would keep it like that so that on his return he could find himself again there, still be a boy within its walls even after his long absence—but of course she was wrong in thinking that she could keep intact a state of

happiness which was gone for ever or hold back the flight of time, wrong in imagining that when her son came back and the doors and windows were reopened everything would be as before.

At this point his friend Vescovi took an affectionate farewell and Drogo went on alone, drawing nearer to the mountains. The sun stood overhead when he reached the mouth of the valley leading to the Fort. On the right he could see on a mountain top the redoubt Vescovi had pointed out. It couldn't be very much further.

In his anxiety to come to the end of his journey Drogo did not stop to eat, but pushed his already tired horse on up the road, which was becoming steeper and was walled in between precipitous banks. Fewer and fewer people were to be met on the way. Giovanni asked a carter how long it took to reach the Fort.

"The Fort?" answered the man. "What fort?"

"Fort Bastiani," said Drogo.

"There aren't any forts in these parts," said the carter. "I never heard speak of one."

Evidently he was ill-informed. Drogo set off again and as the afternoon advanced became aware of a subtle uneasiness. He searched the topmost rims of the valley to discover the Fort. He imagined a sort of ancient castle with giddy ramparts. As the hours passed he became more and more convinced that Francesco had misinformed him; the redoubt he had pointed out must already be far behind. And evening was coming on.

Look how small they are—Giovanni Drogo and his horse—how small against the side of the mountains which are growing higher and wilder. He goes on climbing so as to reach the Fort before the end of the day, but the shadows rising from the depths where the torrent rushes are quicker than he is. At a certain moment they are level with Drogo on the opposite side of the ravine, seem to slacken pace for a minute as if not to discourage him, then glide up the hillside and over the boulders and the horseman is left behind.

All the valley was already brimful of violet shadows—only the bare grassy crests, incredibly high up, were lit by the sun when suddenly Drogo found himself in front of what seemed—it was black and gigantic against the intense purity of the evening sky—a military building with an ancient and deserted look. Giovanni felt his heart beat, for that must be the Fort; but everything, the ramparts, the very landscape, breathed an inhospitable and sinister air.

He circled it without finding the entrance. Although it was already dark there was no light in any window nor were there any watch-lights on the line of the ramparts. There was only a bat swinging to and fro against the white cloud. At

last Drogo tried a shout.

“Hallo,” he cried, “is anyone there?”

Then a man rose from the shadows which had gathered at the foot of the walls, a poor beggar of some sort with a grey beard and a little bag in his hand. In the half-light it was difficult to make him out; only the white of his eyes glinted. Drogo looked at him with gratitude.

“Who are you looking for, sir?” the man asked.

“I’m looking for the Fort. Is this it?”

“There isn’t a fort here anymore,” said the stranger in a good-natured voice. “It’s all shut up, there hasn’t been anyone here for ten years.”

“Where is the Fort then?” asked Drogo, suddenly annoyed with the man.

“What Fort? Is that it?” And so saying the stranger stretched out his arm and pointed.

In a gap in the nearby crags (they were already deep in darkness), behind a disorderly range of crests and incredibly far off, Giovanni Drogo saw a bare hill which was still bathed in the red light of the sunset—a hill which seemed to have sprung from an enchanted land; on its crest there was a regular, geometric band of a peculiar yellowish colour—the silhouette of the Fort.

But how far off it was still! Hours and hours yet on the road and his horse was spent. Drogo gazed with fascination and wondered what attraction there could be in that solitary and almost inaccessible keep, so cut-off from the world. What secrets did it hide? But time was running short. Already the last rays of the sun were slowly leaving the distant hill and up its yellow bastions swarmed the dark hordes of encroaching night.

II

DARKNESS overtook him on the way. The valley had narrowed and the Fort had disappeared behind the overhanging mountains. There were no lights, not even the voices of night birds—only from time to time the noise of distant water.

He tried to call, but the echoes threw back his voice with a hostile note. He tied his horse to a tree trunk on the roadside where it might find some grass. Here he sat down, his back to the bank, waiting for sleep to come, and thought meanwhile of the journey ahead, of the people he would find at the Fort, of his future life; but he could see no cause for joy. From time to time the horse pawed the ground with its hooves in a strange, disturbing manner.

When at dawn he set off again he noticed that on the other side of the valley, at the same height, there was another road, and shortly after made out something moving on it. The sun had not yet reached so far down and the shadows lay heavily in the angles of the road, making it difficult to see clearly. But by quickening his pace Drogo contrived to draw abreast and saw that it was a man—an officer on horseback.

A man like himself at last—a friendly being with whom he could laugh and joke, talk of the life they were going to share, of hunting expeditions, of women, of the city; of the city which to Drogo now seemed to have become part of a distant world.

Meanwhile the valley grew narrower and the two roads drew closer, so that Giovanni Drogo saw that the other was a captain. At first he did not dare to shout—it would have seemed silly and disrespectful. Instead he saluted several times, raising his right hand to his cap, but the other did not respond. Evidently he had not noticed Drogo.

“Captain,” Giovanni cried at last, overcome by impatience, and he saluted again.

“What is it?” a voice replied from the other side.

The captain had halted and saluted correctly and now asked Drogo to explain his cry. There was no severity in the question, but it was evident that the officer was surprised.

“What is it?” the captain’s voice echoed again, this

time slightly irritated.

Giovanni stopped, used his hands as a megaphone and replied with all his breath:

“Nothing, I wanted to say ‘Good day’ to you.”

It was a stupid explanation—almost an offensive one, because it might be taken for a joke. Drogo repented of it at once. He had got himself into a ridiculous situation simply because he was bored with himself.

“Who are you?” the captain shouted back.

It was the question Drogo had feared. This strange conversation across the valley was beginning to sound like an official interrogation. It was an unpleasant beginning, since it was probable, if not certain, that the captain was from the Fort. However, he had to reply.

“Lieutenant Drogo,” Giovanni shouted, introducing himself.

The captain did not know him—in all probability could not catch the name at that distance; however, he seemed to become less ruffled, for he moved forward again making an affirmative gesture as if to say that they would meet shortly. In fact, half an hour later a bridge appeared at a point where the ravine narrowed. The two roads became one.

At the bridge the two men met. The captain, without dismounting, came up to Drogo and held out his hand. He was a man getting on for forty or perhaps older with a thin, aristocratic face. His uniform was clumsily cut but perfectly correct. He introduced himself: “Captain Ortiz.”

As he shook his hand it seemed to Drogo that he was at last entering the world of the Fort. This was the first link, to be followed by all sorts of others which would shut him in.

Without more ado the captain set off again and Drogo followed at his side, keeping a little behind out of respect for his rank and awaiting some unpleasant reference to the embarrassing conversation of a few minutes before. Instead the captain kept silence—perhaps he did not want to speak, perhaps he was shy and did not know how to begin. Since the road was steep and the sun hot, the two horses walked on slowly.

At last Captain Ortiz said: “I didn’t catch your name at that distance a little while ago. Droso, wasn’t it?”

“Drogo, with a ‘g’ ” Giovanni answered, “Giovanni Drogo. But really, sir, you must excuse me if I shouted back there. You see,” he added with confusion, “I didn’t see your rank across the valley.”

“No, you couldn’t see,” Ortiz admitted, not bothering to contradict him, and he laughed.

They rode on thus a while, both a little embarrassed. Then Ortiz said: “And

where are you bound for like this?"

"For Fort Bastiani. Isn't this the road?"

"Yes, it is."

They fell silent. It was hot; on all sides there were still mountains, huge wild grass-covered mountains. "So you are coming to the Fort?" said Ortiz. "Is it with a dispatch?"

"No, sir, I am going on duty. I have been posted there."

"Posted to the strength?"

"I believe so, to the strength, my first posting."

"I see, to the strength, quite right. Good, good. May I congratulate you?"

"Thank you, sir."

They fell silent again and rode on a little further. Giovanni had a tremendous thirst; there was a wooden water-bottle hanging by the captain's saddle and you could hear the glug-glug of the water in it.

"For two years?" asked Ortiz.

"I beg your pardon, sir—did you say for two years?"

"Yes, for two years—you will be doing the usual two years' tour of duty, won't you?"

"Two years? I don't know. They didn't tell me for how long."

"But of course it's two years—all you newly commissioned lieutenants do two years, then you leave."

"Two years is the usual for everyone?"

"Of course it's two years—for seniority they count as four. That's the important thing. Otherwise no one would apply for the post. Well, if it means a quick rise I suppose you can get used to the Fort, what d'you say?"

Drogo had never heard of this, but, not wishing to cut a stupid figure, he tried a vague phrase:

"Of course, a lot of them . . ."

Ortiz did not press the point; apparently the topic did not interest him. But now that the ice was broken, Giovanni hazarded a question:

"So at the Fort everyone has double seniority?"

"Who is everyone?"

"I mean the other officers."

Ortiz chuckled.

"The whole lot of them! That's good. Only the subalterns, of course, otherwise who would ask to be posted to it?"

"I didn't," said Drogo.

"You didn't?"

"No, sir, I learned Only two days ago that I had been posted to the Fort."

“Well, that’s certainly odd.”

Once more they were silent, each apparently thinking different thoughts.

“Of course,” said Ortiz, “it might mean . . .”

Giovanni shook himself.

“You were saying, sir?”

“I was saying—it might mean that no one else asked for the posting and so they assigned you officially.”

“Perhaps that’s it, sir.”

“Yes, that must be it, right enough.”

Drogo watched the clear-cut shadow of the two horses on the dust of the road, their heads nodding at every step; he heard only the fourfold beat of their hooves, the hum of a fly. The end of the road was still not in sight. Every now and again when the valley curved one could see the road ahead, very high up, cut into precipitous hillsides, climbing in zigzags. They would reach that spot, look up and there the road was still in front of them, still climbing higher. “Excuse me, sir,” asked Drogo.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Is it still far?”

“Not very—about two and a half hours, perhaps three at this pace. Perhaps we will be there by midday.”

They were silent for a while; the horses were in a lather—the captain’s was tired and dragged its hooves.

“You are from the Royal Military Academy, I suppose?” said Ortiz.

“Yes, sir, from the Academy.”

“I see—and tell me, is Colonel Magnus still there?”

“Colonel Magnus? I don’t think so. I don’t know him.”

The valley was narrowing now, shutting out the sunlight from the pass. Every now and again dark ravines opened off it and down them there came icy winds; at the head of the ravines one caught sight of steep, steep peaks. So high did they seem, that you would have said two or three days were not time enough to reach the summit."

“And tell me,” said Ortiz, “is Major Bosco still there? Does he still run the musketry course?”

“No, sir, I don’t think so. There’s Zimmermann—Major Zimmermann.”

“Yes, Zimmermann, that’s right, I’ve heard his name. The point is that it is a good many years since my time. They will all be different now.”

Both now had their own thoughts. The road had come out into the sun again, mountain followed mountain, even steeper now with rock faces here and there.

“I saw it in the distance yesterday evening,” said Drogo.

“What—the Fort?”

“Yes, the Fort.” He paused, then added to show that he knew how to behave: “It must be very large, isn’t it? It seemed immense to me.”

“The Fort—very large? No, no, it is one of the smallest—a very old building. It is only from the distance that it looks a little impressive.” He was silent for a moment, then added: “Very, very old and completely out of date.”

“But isn’t it one of the principal ones?”

“No, no, it’s a second class fort,” Ortiz replied. He seemed to enjoy belittling it but with a special tone of voice—in the same way as one amuses oneself by remarking on the defects of a son, certain that they will always seem trifling when set against his unlimited virtues.

“It is a dead stretch of frontier,” Ortiz added, “and so they never changed it. It has always remained as it was a century ago.”

“What do you mean—a dead frontier?”

“A frontier which gives no worry. Beyond there is a great desert.”

“A desert?”

“That’s right—a desert. Stones and parched earth they call it the Tartar steppe.”

“Why Tartar?” asked Drogo. “Were there ever Tartars there?”

“Long, long ago, I believe. But it is a legend more than anything else. No one can have come across it—not even in the last wars.”

“So the Fort has never been any use?”

“None at all,” said the captain.

As the road rose more and more the trees came to an end; only a scattered bush remained here and there. For the rest—parched grass, rocks, falls of red earth.

“Excuse me, sir, are there any villages near at hand?”

“No, not near. There’s San Rocco, but it will be twenty miles away.”

“So I don’t suppose there’s much in the way of amusement?”

“Not much, that’s right, not much.”

The air had become cooler, the flanks of the mountains were becoming more rounded, announcing the final crests.

“And don’t people get bored, sir?” asked Giovanni more intimately, laughing at the same time, as if to say that it would be all the same to him.

“You get used to it,” answered Ortiz and added with an implied rebuke: “I have been there for almost eighteen years. No, that’s wrong, I’ve completed my eighteenth.”

“Eighteen years?” said Giovanni greatly impressed.

“Eighteen,” answered the captain.

A flight of ravens passed, skimming the two officers, and plunging into the funnel of the valley.

“Ravens,” said the captain.

Giovanni did not reply—he was thinking of the life that awaited him; he felt that he was no part of that world, of that solitude, of those mountains.

“But,” he asked, “do any of the officers stay on who go there on their first posting?”

“Not many now,” answered Ortiz, half sorry at having decried the Fort and noticing that the other was now going too far, “in fact almost no one. Now they all want to go to a crack garrison. Once it was an honour, Fort Bastiani, now it almost seems to be a punishment.”

Giovanni said nothing but the other went on:

“All the same, it is a frontier garrison. Speaking by and large there are some first class fellows there. A frontier post is still a frontier post after all.”

Drogo kept silent; he felt a sudden oppression. The horizon had widened; in the extreme distance appeared the strange silhouettes of rocky mountains, sharp peaks rising in confusion into the sky.

“Even in the army things are looked at differently these days,” Ortiz went on. “Once upon a time Fort Bastiani was a great honour. Now they say the frontier is dead—they forget that the frontier is always the frontier and one never knows.”

A little stream crossed the road. They stopped to water their horses and, having dismounted, walked up and down a little to stretch themselves.

“Do you know what is really first rate?” said Ortiz and laughed heartily.

“What, sir?”

“The messing—you’ll see how we eat at the Fort. And that explains the number of inspections. A general every fortnight.”

Drogo laughed out of politeness. He could not make out whether Ortiz was a fool, whether he was hiding something or whether he simply talked like that without meaning it.

“Excellent,” said Giovanni, “I’m hungry!”

“We’re nearly there now. Do you see that hillock with the patch of gravel? Well, it is just behind it.”

They set off again; just beyond the hillock with the patch of gravel the two officers emerged on to the edge of a slightly sloping plateau and the Fort appeared a few hundred yards away.

It did indeed seem small compared with the vision of the previous evening. From the central fort, which was like nothing so much as a barrack with a few windows, two low turreted walls ran out to connect it with the lateral redoubts,

two on each side. Thus the walls formed a weak barrier across the whole width of the gap—some five hundred yards—which was shut in on the flanks by high precipitous cliffs.

To the right, at the very foot of the mountain, the plateau fell away into a sort of saddle; there the old road ran through the pass and came to an end against the ramparts.

The Fort was silent, sunk in the full noonday sun, shadowless. Its walls—the front could not be seen since it faced north—stretched out yellow and bare. A chimney gave out pale smoke. All along the ramparts of the central building, of the curtain walls and of the redoubts, dozens of sentries could be seen, with rifles at the slope, walking up and down methodically, each on his own little beat. Like the motion of a pendulum they marked off the passage of time without breaking the enchantment of the immense silence.

To right and left the mountains stretched out as far as the eye could see in precipitous and apparently inaccessible ranges. They too—at least at that time of day—had a parched, yellow colour.

Instinctively Giovanni Drogo stopped his horse. Looking slowly round, he fixed his gaze on the dark walls without being able to read their true meaning. He thought of a prison, he thought of an abandoned palace. A slight breath of wind made a flag, which before had hung limply entangled with the flagstaff, billow out over the Fort. There was the indistinct echo of a trumpet. The sentries walked slowly to and fro. On the square before the gate of the Fort three or four men—at that distance it was impossible to make out whether they were soldiers or not—were loading sacks on to a cart. But over everything there lay a mysterious torpor.

Captain Ortiz, too, had halted to look at the building.

“There it is,” he said, although there was no need to say so.

Drogo thought: now he is going to ask me what I think of it, and was embarrassed at the thought. But instead the captain said nothing. It was not imposing, Fort Bastiani, with its low walls, nor was it in any sense beautiful, nor picturesque with towers and bastions—there was not one single thing to make up for its bareness, to bring to mind the sweets of life. Yet as on the previous evening at the foot of the defile Drogo looked at it as if hypnotized and an inexplicable feeling of excitement entered his heart.

And beyond it, on the other side, what was there? What world opened up beyond that inhospitable building, beyond the ramparts, casemates and magazines which shut off the view? What did the northern kingdom look like, the stony desert no one had ever crossed? The map, Drogo recalled vaguely,

showed beyond the frontier a vast zone with scanty names—but from the eminence of the Fort one would see some village, pastures, a house; or was there only the desolation of an uninhabited waste?

He felt himself suddenly alone, and his soldier's high spirits, which had come so easily till now—as long as the uneventful garrison life lasted, the comforts of home, the constant company of gay friends, at night the little adventures in the gardens—all his self-assurance were suddenly gone. The Fort seemed to him one of those unknown worlds to which he had never seriously thought he might belong—not that they seemed unpleasant, but rather because they appeared infinitely remote from his own life. A world which would make much greater demands of him, a world without splendour unless it were that of its rigid laws.

If only he could turn back, not even cross the threshold of the Fort but ride back down to the plain, to his own city, to his old habits. Such was Drogo's first thought; and, however shameful such weakness in a soldier, he was ready to confess to it, if necessary, provided they let him go at once. But from the invisible north a thick cloud was rising over the glacis and imperturbably the sentries walked up and down under the high sun. Drogo's horse whinnied. Then the great silence fell once more.

Giovanni at last looked away from the Fort and glanced to the side, at the captain, hoping for a friendly word. Ortiz too had remained quite still and was gazing intently at the yellow walls. He, too, who had lived there for eighteen years, looked at them as if bewitched, as if once more he witnessed a miracle. It seemed he could not tire of looking upon them once again, and a vague smile, half joyful, half sad, slowly lit his face.

III

THE first thing Drogo did was to report to the adjutant, Major Matti. The orderly officer, an easy-going, friendly young man called Carlo Morel, accompanied him through the heart of the fortress. Leaving the entrance hall, from which one caught a glimpse of a great empty courtyard, the two went down a long corridor whose end was lost to sight. The ceiling was hidden in shadow; at intervals a little beam of light came in through a narrow window.

It was not until they had climbed to the next floor that they met a soldier carrying a bundle of papers. From the damp and naked walls, the silence, the dim lighting, it seemed as if the inmates had forgotten that somewhere in the world there existed flowers, laughing women, gay and hospitable houses. Here everything spoke of renunciation, but for whom, to what mysterious end? Now they were traversing the second floor along a corridor exactly similar to the first. From somewhere behind the walls there came the distant echo of a laugh; to Drogo it seemed unreal.

Major Matti was plump and smiled with an excess of good nature. His office was huge, the desk big in proportion and covered with orderly heaps of paper. There was a coloured print of the king, and the major's sword hung on a wooden peg driven in for the purpose.

Drogo came to attention and reported. He produced his personal documents and began to explain that he had not made any request to be posted to the fortress—he was determined to have himself transferred as soon as possible—but Major Matti interrupted him.

“I knew your father years ago. A very fine gentleman. I am sure you will wish to live up to his memory. A President of the High Court, if I remember rightly?”

“No, sir,” said Drogo, “he was a doctor, my father.”

“Ah, yes, of course, I was forgetting, a doctor, of course, of course.” For a moment Matti seemed to be embarrassed, and Drogo noted how he kept raising his left hand to his collar as if trying to hide a round, greasy stain, evidently a fresh one, on the breast of his uniform.

The major recovered himself quickly.

“I am very pleased to see you,” he said. “You know what His Majesty Peter III said? ‘Fort Bastiani the guardian of my crown I may add that it is an honour

to belong to it. Don't you agree?"

He said these things automatically, as if they were a formula learned years before which he must produce on certain set occasions.

"Yes, sir," said Giovanni, "you are quite right, but I must confess it was a surprise to me. I have my family in the city and should prefer if possible to stay . . ."

"So you want to leave us before you arrive, do you? I must say I'm sorry, very sorry."

"It isn't that I wish to. I would not dream of arguing. I mean that I . . ."

"I understand," said the major and sighed as if this were an old story and he could sympathise with it. "I understand. You had thought the Fort would be different and now you are a bit frightened. But tell me honestly—how can you form an opinion of it if you have only arrived a few minutes ago?"

"I haven't the slightest objection to the Fort, sir," said Drogo. "Only I should prefer to stay in the city or at least near it. You understand? I am talking to you in confidence, because I see you understand these things. I put myself in your hands."

"Of course, of course," exclaimed Matti with a short laugh. "That's what we are here for. We don't want anyone here against his will—not even the least important sentry. Still, I'm sorry. You seem a good lad to me."

The major fell silent a moment, as if to consider the best solution. It was at this point, as he turned his head a little to the left, that Drogo's glance fell on the window opening on to the inner courtyard. He could see the northern wall, yellowish like the others and sun-beaten like them, with here and there the black rectangle of a window. There was a clock as well, pointing to two o'clock, and on the topmost terrace a sentry walking to and fro with his rifle at the slope. But over the ramparts, far, far away, in the glare of noon, there rose a rocky crest. Only its extreme tip could be seen and in itself it was nothing out of the ordinary. Yet for Giovanni Drogo that fragment of rock represented the first visible lure of the northern territory, the legendary kingdom whose existence hung heavily over the Fort. What was the rest like? he wondered. From it there came a drowsy light shining through slow-moving smoky wisps of mist. Then the major began to speak again.

"Tell me," he asked Drogo, "would you like to go back straight away or would it be the same to you if you waited a month or two? For us, I repeat, it is all the same—from the official point of view, that is," he added so as not to sound discourteous.

"Since I have to go back," said Giovanni, pleasantly surprised at the lack of difficulties, "since I have to go back it seems to me I had better go at once."

“Quite right, quite right,” said the major soothingly. “But now I must tell you something; If you want to go right away the best thing is for you to go sick. You go into the sick bay under observation for a day or two and the doctor gives you a certificate. There are a lot of people in any case who can’t stand up to the altitude.”

“Do I really have to go sick?” asked Drogo, who did not like this sort of fiction.

“You don’t have to, but it makes everything easier. Otherwise you would have to make a written request for a posting. That has to be sent to the High Command, the High Command has to reply—that means at least a fortnight. Above all, the colonel has to go into the matter, and that I would prefer to avoid. Because he does find these things unpleasant—they hurt him, that’s it, they hurt him just as if you were doing an injury to his Fort. Well then, if I were you, if you want me to be frank, I would try to avoid it.”

“But excuse me, sir,” said Drogo, “I didn’t know that. If my going away might cause me trouble then it’s another matter.”

“Not at all, you have misunderstood me. In neither case will your career suffer. It is only a case of a—of a shade of meaning. Of course, and I told you this right away, the colonel will not be pleased. But if you have really made up your mind. . . .”

“No, no,” said Drogo, “if things are as you say perhaps the medical certificate is better.”

“Unless . . .” said Matti with a meaning smile and leaving his sentence in mid-air.

“Unless?”

“Unless you were to put up with staying here four months—which would be the best solution.”

“Four months?” asked Drogo, already somewhat disappointed, since he had thought to be leaving at once.

“Four months,” Matti confirmed. “The procedure is much more regular that way. I’ll explain to you direct. Twice a year there is a medical inspection—it is laid down. The next will be in four months’ time. That seems to me to be your best opportunity. I give you my word that, if you like, your report will be adverse. You can set your mind absolutely at rest.”

“Besides,” continued the major after a pause, “besides, four months are four months long enough for a personal report. You can be certain that the colonel will do one on you. And you know how important that can be for your career. But let us get this quite, quite clear—you are perfectly free . . .”

“Yes, sir,” said Drogo, “I understand perfectly.”

“Service here is not hard,” the major emphasized “almost always guard duties. And the New Redoubt, which demands more of one, will certainly not be entrusted to you to begin with. There will be no hard tasks, don’t be afraid—you won’t ever be bored.”

But Drogo was scarcely listening to Matti’s explanations, for his attention was strangely attracted by the picture framed in the window with that tiny piece of crag showing above the wall. A vague feeling to which he did not have the key was gradually penetrating into his inmost being—a stupid and absurd feeling, a baseless fancy.

At the same time he felt somewhat calmer. He was still anxious to go, but not so desperately as before. He was almost ashamed at the fears he had had on his arrival. He could not believe that he was not as good a man as all the others. If he left at once, he now thought, it might be looked upon as a confession of inferiority. Thus his own conceit of himself fought with his longing for the old familiar existence.

“Sir,” said Drogo, “thank you for your advice, but let me think it over till tomorrow.”

“Very, well,” said Matti with evident satisfaction, “And this evening? Do you want to meet the colonel in the mess or would you prefer to leave things in the air?”

“I don’t know,” answered Giovanni, “it seems to me there’s no use my hiding myself, particularly if I have to stay four months?”

“That’s better,” said the major. “You’ll get confidence that way. You will see what nice people they are all first-class officers.”

Matti smiled and Drogo saw that the time had come to leave. But first of all he asked:

“Sir,” his voice was apparently calm, “may I take a quick look to the north and see what there is beyond that wall?”

“Beyond the wall? I didn’t know you were interested in views,” answered the major.

“Just a glance, sir, merely out of curiosity. I’ve heard there is a desert and I’ve never seen one.”

“It isn’t worth it. A monotonous landscape—no beauty in it. Take my advice—don’t think about it.”

“I won’t insist, sir,” said Drogo. “I did not think there was anything against it.”

Major Matti put the tips of his plump fingers together almost as if in prayer.

“You have asked me,” he said, “the one thing I can’t grant you. Only personnel on duty may go on to the ramparts or into the guard rooms; you need

to know the password.”

“But not even as a special exception—not even for an officer?”

“Not even for an officer. Oh, I know—for you people from the city all these petty rules seem ridiculous. Besides down there the password is no great secret. But here it is different.”

“Excuse me, if I keep on about it.”

“Do please, do.”

“I wanted to say—isn’t there even a loophole, a window from which one can look?”

“Only one. Only one in the colonel’s office. Unfortunately no one thought of a belvedere for the inquisitive. But it isn’t worth it, I repeat, a landscape with nothing to recommend it. You will have plenty of that view if you decide to stay.”

“Thank you, sir, will that be all?” And coming to attention, he saluted.

Matti made a friendly gesture with his hand.

“Goodbye. Forget about it—a worthless landscape, I assure you, an extremely stupid landscape.”

But that evening Lieutenant Morel, who had come off orderly duty, secretly led Drogo on to the top of the wall to let him see.

An immensely long corridor, lit by infrequent lamps, ran all the length of the walls from one side of the pass to the other. Every so often there was a door—storerooms, workshops, guard rooms. They walked for about a hundred and fifty yards to the entrance of the third redoubt. An armed sentry stood before the door. Morel asked to speak to Lieutenant Grotta, who was commander of the guard.

Thus they were able to enter in defiance of the regulations. Giovanni found himself in the entrance to a narrow passageway; on one wall there was a board with the names of the soldiers on duty.

“Come on, come this way,” said Morel to Drogo, “we had better hurry.”

Drogo followed him up a narrow stair which came out into the open air on the ramparts of the redoubt. To the sentry who paced to and fro Lieutenant Morel made a sign as if to say there was no need for formalities.

Giovanni suddenly found himself looking on to the outer battlements; in front of him the valley fell away, flooded with moonlight, and the secrets of the north lay open before his eyes.

A kind of pallor came over Drogo’s face as he looked; he was as rigid as stone. The nearby sentry had halted and an unbroken silence seemed to have descended through the diffused half-light. Then without shifting his gaze Drogo asked:

“And beyond—beyond that rock what is it like? Does it go on and on like this?”

“I have never seen it,” replied Morel. “You have to go to the New Redoubt that one there on the peak. From there you see all the plain beyond. They say . . .” And here he fell silent.

“What do they say?” asked Drogo, and his voice trembled with unusual anxiety.

“They say it is all covered with stones—a sort of desert, with white stones, they say—like snow.”

“All stones—and nothing else?”

“That’s what they say—and an occasional patch of marsh.”

“But right over—in the north they must see something.”

“Usually there are mists on the horizon,” said Morel, who had lost his previous warm enthusiasm. “There are mists which keep you from seeing,”

“Mists,” said Drogo incredulously. “They can’t always be there—the horizon must clear now and again.”

“Hardly ever clear, not even in winter. But some people say they have seen things.”

“Seen? What sort of things?”

“They mean they’ve dreamt things. You go and hear what the soldiers have to say. One says one thing, one another. Some say they have seen white towers, or else they say there is a smoking volcano and that is where the mists come from. Even Ortiz, Captain Ortiz, maintains he saw something five years ago now. According to him there is a long black patch—forests probably.”

They were both silent. Where, Drogo asked himself, had he seen this world before? Had he lived there in his dreams or created it as he read some ancient tale. He seemed to make some things out—the low crumbling rocks, the winding valley in which there were neither trees nor verdure, those precipitous slopes and finally that triangle of desolate plain which the rocks before him could not conceal. Responses had been awakened in the very depth of his being and he could not grasp them.

At this moment Drogo was looking at the northern world—the uninhabited land across which, or so they said, no man had ever come. No enemy had ever come out of it; there had been no battles; nothing had ever happened.

“Well,” asked Morel attempting to assume a jovial tone, “you like it?”

“I don’t know,” was all Drogo could say. Within he was a whirl of confused desires and foolish fears.

There was a bugle call, a low bugle call, but he could not tell where.

“You had better go now,” advised Morel. But Giovanni did not seem to hear,

intent as he was on searching his thoughts. The evening light was failing and the wind, re-awakened by the shadows, slid along the geometrical architecture of the Fort. In order to keep warm the sentry had begun to walk up and down again, gazing every now and then at Giovanni Drogo, whom he did not know.

“You had better go now,” repeated Morel, taking his comrade by the arm.

IV

HE had often been alone; sometimes even as a child, lost in the countryside; on other occasions it had been in the city at night, in streets where crime was commonplace; then there was the night before when he had slept by the wayside. But now it was quite different—now that the excitement of the journey was over and his new comrades were already sleeping and he sat in his room on his bed by the light of the lamp, sad and lost. Now he really understood what solitude meant—(quite a nice room, all panelled with wood, with a big bed, a table, an uncomfortable divan and a wardrobe). Everyone had been nice to him; in the mess they had opened a bottle of wine in his honour, but now he did not care, had already completely forgotten them—above the bed there was a wooden crucifix, opposite it an old print with a text of which the first words could be read: *Humanissimi Viri Francesci Angloisi virtutibus*. During the whole night no one would come in to greet him; in all the Fort no one was thinking of him and not only in the Fort, probably in the whole world, there was not a soul who had a thought for Drogo; everyone has his own worries, can barely cope with himself—perhaps even his mother at that moment had other things on her mind, for he was not her only child and she had thought about Giovanni all day; now it was the others' turn. That was more than fair, Drogo admitted to himself without the shadow of reproof, but meantime he was sitting on the edge of his bed in his room in the Fort (there was, he now saw, cut into the paneling and coloured with extraordinary patience a full scale sabre, which at first glance almost seemed real—the painstaking work of some officer years before), he was sitting on the edge of his bed, with his head bent forward a little, his back bowed, his eyes heavy and dull, and felt himself alone as never before in his life.

Suddenly he rose with an effort, opened the window and looked out. The window gave on to the courtyard and there was nothing else to be seen. Since it looked towards the south Drogo sought in vain to distinguish in the darkness the mountains which he had crossed to reach the Fort; but they were lower than he thought and hidden by the wall.

Only three windows were lit but they were in the same block as his own and so he could not see in; the light they threw out and that from Drogo's room fell on the wall opposite where it seemed to be magnified; a shadow was moving in

one of them—perhaps an officer undressing.

Drogo shut the window, undressed, went to bed and lay thinking for a few minutes, looking at the ceiling; it too was lined with wood. He had forgotten to bring anything to read but that did not matter, he felt so sleepy. He put out the lamp; little by little the pale rectangle of the window emerged from the dark and Drogo saw the stars shining.

He felt as if a sudden drowsiness were dragging him down into sleep. But he was too conscious of it. A confusion of images, almost like the figures of a dream, passed before his eyes and even began to form a story; then a few seconds later he found that he was still awake.

More awake than before, because the vastness of the silence suddenly struck him. From far, far away—or had he imagined it?—there came the sound of a cough. Then close by a soft drip of water sounded in the wall. If he lay still he could see that a small green star, which in the course of its journey through the night had reached the top of his window, was on the point of disappearing; it twinkled for a moment on the very edge of the dark window frame and then finally disappeared. Drogo wanted to follow it a little further by leaning his head forward. At that moment there was another “plop” as if something had fallen into the water. Would it be repeated again? He lay waiting for the noise, such a sound as went with underground passages, marshes and deserted houses. The minutes appeared to stand still; complete silence seemed at last to be undisputed master of the Fort. And once more wild images of the life he had left so far behind crowded round Drogo.

There it was again, the sound he hated. Drogo sat up. So it was a noise that went on and on; the last splash had been no less loud than the first so it could not be a drip which would at last die away. How could he sleep? Drogo remembered that there was a cord hanging by the side of the bed, perhaps a bell cord. He tried pulling it; the cord answered his pull and in some remote and winding corridor of the building a brief tinkling answered almost imperceptibly. But how stupid it was, thought Drogo, to call someone for such a trifle. And who would come in any case?

Soon after there was the sound of feet in the corridor outside; they drew closer and someone knocked at the door. “Come in,” said Drogo. A soldier with a lamp in his hand appeared. “Yes sir,” he said.

“It’s impossible to sleep here, damn it,” said Drogo becoming coldly angry. “What is this wretched noise? There’s a pipe burst; see that you stop it—it’s quite impossible to sleep. All you need is a rag under it.”

“It’s the cistern, sir,” the soldier answered immediately as if he were used to the whole affair. “It’s the cistern, sir, there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“The cistern?”

“Yes, sir,” explained the soldier. “The cistern—just behind that wall. Everyone complains but no one has ever been able to do anything about it. Captain Fonzaso shouts about it every now and again too, but it’s no good.”

“Away you go then,” said Drogo. The door closed, the footsteps died away, the silence grew again, the stars gleamed in the window. Giovanni thought of the sentries walking up and down like automata a few yards from him, without pause. Scores of men were awake while he lay in bed and everything seemed sunk in sleep. Scores—thought Drogo—but for whom and why? It seemed as if in the Fort the rigid laws of army life had reached a pitch of insanity. Hundreds of men guarding a gap through which no one would pass. Let me get away, get away as soon as possible, thought Giovanni, get away from this atmosphere, from this mysterious mist. He thought of his own simple home: at this hour his mother would be asleep, all the lights out—unless she were still thinking of him for a moment, which was very likely; he knew her so well and how for the least thing she would lie and worry all night and turn in her bed, unable to rest.

Once more there was the hollow overflow of the cistern, another star passed out of the frame of the window and its light continued to reach the world, the breastworks of the Fort, the feverish eyes of the sentries, but not Giovanni Drogo who lay waiting for sleep, a prey to sinister thoughts.

Supposing all Matti’s hair-splitting was an act he put on? Suppose in actual fact they didn’t let him go even at the end of four months? Suppose they kept him from seeing the city again with excuses and quibbles about regulations? Suppose he had to stay up there for years and years, in this room, in this solitary bed, suppose he had to waste all his youth? What absurd things to think, said Drogo to himself, realizing their stupidity; yet he did not succeed in dispelling them, for soon under cover of the night they returned.

Thus he seemed to feel spreading around him an obscure plot to try to retain him there. Probably not even Matti was concerned in it. Neither he nor the colonel, nor any other officer was the least interested in him; whether he stayed or went was completely indifferent to them. Yet some unknown force was working against his return to the city—a force which perhaps without his knowing it had its origins in his own heart.

Then he saw a great hall, a horse on a white road; he seemed to hear voices calling him by name and fell asleep.

V

Two evenings later Giovanni Drogo was on duty in the third redoubt for the first time. At six o'clock in the evening the seven guards formed up in the courtyard—three for the Fort, four for the lateral redoubts. The eighth—that for the New Redoubt—had left earlier, for it had some way to go.

Sergeant-Major Tronk, an old inhabitant of the Fort, had been in charge of the men for the third redoubt—twenty-eight of them with a trumpeter who made twenty-nine. They were all from number two company—Captain Ortiz' company to which Giovanni had been posted. Drogo took command and unsheathed his sword.

The seven guards were drawn up in line with perfect dressing; in accordance with tradition, the colonel watched from a window. On the yellow courtyard they made a black pattern which was good to see.

The last rays of the sun slanted across the walls and over them the sky was bright, swept clear by the wind. A September evening. The second-in-command, Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolosi, came out by the great door of the command post, limping from an old wound and leaning on his sword. That day it was Monti's turn to inspect the guard, an immense captain whose hoarse voice gave the command and all together, absolutely together, the soldiers presented arms with a great metallic clash. There was a tremendous silence.

Then one by one the trumpeters of the seven guards sounded the calls. They were the famous silver trumpets of Fort Bastiani, with cords of red and gold silk hung with a great coat of arms. Their pure note filled the sky and the motionless hedge of bayonets resounded with it, like the low resonance of a bell. The soldiers were as motionless as statues; their faces military and expressionless. It could not be that they were preparing for monotonous spells of guard duty; with such heroic mien they must surely be going to face the enemy.

The last call hung in the air, repeated by the distant ramparts. The bayonets gleamed for another second, bright against the deep sky, only to be swallowed up in the ranks—all extinguished together. The colonel had disappeared from the window. The steps of the seven guards echoed as through the labyrinth of the Fort they marched off to their respective stations.

An hour later Giovanni Drogo was on the topmost terrace of the third redoubt

on the very spot where the evening before he had looked towards the north. Yesterday he had come sight-seeing like a passing visitor. Now he was master there; for twenty-four hours the whole redoubt and a hundred yards of wall were under his sole command. Below him, in the interior of the fortification, two artillerymen stood by the two cannon which covered the end of the valley. Three sentries divided between them the perimeter of the redoubt; four others were set out along the wall to the right at intervals of twenty-five yards.

The relief of the sentries coming off duty had taken place with meticulous precision under the eyes of Sergeant-Major Tronk, who was an expert on rules and regulations. He had been in the Fort for twenty-two years and now did not stir from it even on leave. There was no one who knew as he did every corner of the fortifications and often the officers came on him by night making a round of inspection, when it was as dark as pitch, without a light of any kind. When he was on duty the sentries did not lay down their rifles even for a second nor lean against the ramparts—they were even careful not to stop pacing up and down, for rests were granted only exceptionally; Tronk did not sleep all night, making the rounds with silent tread, causing the sentries to start. “Who goes there? Who goes there?” they challenged, bringing their guns to their shoulders.

“Grotta,” replied the sergeant-major. “Gregorio,” said the sentry.

The usual practice was for the officers and N.C.O.’s on duty to make the rounds on their own stretch of wall informally; the soldiers knew them well by sight and it would have seemed ridiculous to exchange passwords. It was only with Tronk that the soldiers carried out the regulations to the letter.

He was small and thin with an old man’s face and a shorn head; he spoke little even to his equals in rank and in his free time preferred to study music in solitude. That was his mania—so much so that the drum-major, Espina, was perhaps his only friend. He had a fine accordion which he hardly ever played, although the story went that he played wonderfully. He studied harmony and was said to have written a number of military marches. But no one really knew.

When he was on duty there was no risk of his beginning to whistle as he usually did when he was free. Mostly he made a round of the battlements, scanning the great valley to the north as if looking for something. Now he was at Drogo’s side and was showing him the mule-path which lead along precipitous slopes to the New Redoubt.

“There is the guard which has been relieved,” said Tronk pointing with his right hand; but in the twilight Drogo could not pick it out. The sergeant—major shook his head. . .

“What’s wrong?” asked Drogo.

“It won’t work like this—I’ve always said so—it’s mad,” answered Tronk.

“But what has happened?”

“It can’t go on like this,” Tronk repeated, “they should change it earlier, the guard at the New Redoubt. But the colonel won’t hear of it.”

Giovanni looked at him in amazement. Did Tronk really permit himself the liberty of criticizing the colonel?

“The colonel,” the sergeant-major went on with the utmost gravity and conviction and with not the least attempt to correct himself, “the colonel is perfectly right from his point of view. But no one has explained the danger to him.”

“The danger?” asked Drogo—what danger could there be in moving from the Fort to the New Redoubt along that easy path and in such a deserted spot?

“The danger?” repeated Tronk. “Sooner or later something will happen in this dark.”

“What should they do then?” asked Drogo out of politeness, for he was only very mildly interested in the whole story.

“Once upon a time,” said the sergeant-major, delighted to show off his knowledge, “once upon a time the guard at the New Redoubt was changed two hours before it was at the Fort. Always in daytime, even in winter; and then the whole system of passwords was simpler. They needed one to get into the New Redoubt; then they needed another new one for that day’s guard and for getting back to the Fort. Two were enough. When the guard had dismounted and was back in the Fort the new guard here had not yet been mounted and the password was still valid.”

“I see,” said Drogo, no longer trying to follow.

“But then,” Tronk went on, “they were afraid. It’s risky, they said, to let so many soldiers who know the password go about outside the Fort. You never know, they said, of fifty soldiers there is more chance of one turning traitor than one officer.”

“So they thought only the guard commander should know the password. So now they leave the Fort three-quarters of an hour before the changing of the guard. Take today. Guard mounting takes place at six. The guard for the New Redoubt left here at quarter past five and got there at six sharp. They need no password to leave the Fort being in column of march. To get into the New Redoubt they needed yesterday’s password—and that only the officer knew. Once the guard at the Redoubt has been relieved today’s password comes into force—that again only the officer knows. And so it goes on for twenty-four hours until the new guard comes to take over. Then tomorrow evening when the soldiers get back to the Fort—they may get there at half past six, the road is easier going back—the password has changed again. So a third one is needed.

The officer has to know three—one for the march out, one for the tour of duty and one for coming back. All these complications so that the soldiers won't know what it is while on the march."

"And I say," he went on without bothering whether Drogo was paying attention or not, "I say, if only the officer knows the password and suppose he turns ill on the way—what do the soldiers do? They can't make him speak. And they can't go back where they came from because in the meantime the word has changed there. Haven't they thought of that? And then if they want secrecy, don't they see that this way they need three passwords instead of two and the third, the one for getting back into the Fort, is given out more than twenty-four hours before? Whatever happens they must enforce it, otherwise the guard can't come back into the Fort."

"But," Drogo objected, "they know them perfectly well at the gate, don't they? they should see that it was the guard coming off duty?"

Tronk looked at the lieutenant with a certain air of superiority.

"That's impossible, sir. There is a rule at the Fort. No one, no matter who he is, may come into the Fort from the north without giving the pass."

"But then," said Drogo, whom this absurd inflexibility irritated, "but then wouldn't it be simpler to have a special password for the New Redoubt? They could be relieved sooner and the password for coming back given to the officer only. That way the soldiers would know nothing."

"Of course," said the sergeant-major as if he had been waiting for this very argument, "it would perhaps be the best solution. But you would have to change the regulations, you would need a new law. The regulations say" (he put a didactic tone into his voice) "The password shall remain in force for twenty-four hours from one guard mounting to another; there shall be only one password current in the Fort and its outposts.' That's what they say—'its outposts.' It is quite clear. There's no way round it."

"But once," said Drogo, who had not been listening at the beginning, "once the changing of the guard was carried out earlier at the New Redoubt?"

"That's right," said Tronk, then corrected himself. "Yes, sir. There has only been all this business for two years. Before it was much better."

The sergeant-major fell silent. Drogo looked at him in amazement and horror. After twenty-two years in the Fort what was left of this soldier? Did Tronk still remember that somewhere there still existed millions of men like himself who were not in uniform? who moved freely about the city and at night could go to bed or to an inn or to the theatre, as they liked? No, you could see at a glance that Tronk had forgotten other men—for him nothing existed but the Fort and its hateful regulations. Tronk had forgotten the sweet sound of girls' voices, what a

garden was like, or a river or any tree but the stunted bushes scattered round the Fort. Tronk looked towards the north, it was true, but not with the same feelings in his breast as Drogo; he gazed at the road to the New Redoubt, examined the moat and the glacis, scanned the possible approach routes but not the savage crags, nor that triangle of mysterious plain nor the white clouds sailing through the sky where night had almost come.

Then as darkness fell Drogo once more became a prey to his desire to escape. Why had he not left at once? he kept asking himself. Why had he given in to Matti's smooth diplomacy? Now he had to wait for four months to pass, one hundred and twenty long, long days, half of them spent on guard on the walls. He felt that he was among men of another race, in a foreign country, a hard, thankless world. He looked around him and saw Tronk standing motionless watching the sentries.

VI

NIGHT had fallen everywhere. Drogo was sitting in the bare room of the redoubt. Having sent for pen and ink "Dear mother," he began, and at once felt as he had when a child. He was alone, sitting by the light of a lamp in the heart of an unfamiliar Fort, he was far from home, from all the good, familiar things, but at least there was a consolation in being able to unfold his heart.

Of course with the others, with his colleagues, he had to be a man, had to laugh with them and tell swashbuckling stories about women and the soldier's life. But to whom could he tell the truth if not to his mother? And that evening the truth as Drogo saw it was not what you would have expected from a good soldier—probably it was unworthy of the austere Fort, and his companions would have laughed at it. The truth was that he was tired from the journey, that the gloomy walls weighed upon him, that he felt completely alone.

"I got here tired out after two days' travelling," that was what he would write, "and when I did get here I learned that if I wanted I could go back to the city. The Fort is a melancholy place—there are no villages nearby, there are no amusements and no fun." That was what he would write.

"Dear mother," his hand wrote, "I got here yesterday after an excellent journey. The Fort is wonderful . . ." If only he could convey to her the dinginess of the walls, the vague feeling of punishment and of exile, the absurdity of these foreign-seeming men. "The officers gave me an affectionate welcome," he wrote. "Even the adjutant was very nice and left me completely free to go back to the city if I wanted to. But I . . ."

Perhaps at that very moment his mother was roaming about his empty room, opening a drawer, tidying some of his old clothes or his books or his desk; she had put them to rights often before but by doing it she seemed to have him with her again, as if he were about to come home as usual for supper. He seemed to hear the familiar noise of her little, restless footsteps which always seemed to say that she was worried about someone. He wondered how he had ever had the courage to cause her bitterness. If he had been with her, in the same room, drawn together in the light of the familiar lamp, then Giovanni would have told her everything and would, not have been able to be sad because he was beside her and the bad things were over and done with. But how could he do it from a

distance, by letter? If he were sitting beside her in front of the fire, in the reassuring quiet of the old house, then he could have spoken about Major Matti and of his treacherous smoothness, of Tronk's mania. He would have told her how stupidly he had agreed to stay for four months and probably the two of them would have laughed about it. But how could he do it at this distance?

"However," Drogo wrote, "I thought it best both for myself and my career to stay up here a while. Besides the other officers are very pleasant and the duties easy and not tiring." But what about his room, the noise of the cistern, the meeting with Captain Ortiz and the desolate northern territory? Hadn't he to explain about the iron rules of the guard and this bare redoubt? No, he could not be frank even with his mother—even to her he could not confess the vague fears which beset him.

Now at home, in the city, the clocks were striking ten, one after another in varied tones; as they chimed the glasses in the cupboards tinkled a little; from the kitchen there came the echo of laughter; from across the way, a tune on the piano. From where he sat Drogo could glance through a window so extremely narrow as to be almost a slit in the wall and see the valley to the north, that melancholy land; but at this moment there was nothing to see but darkness. The pen squeaked a little. Although the night held full sway the wind began to blow through the crenellations bearing unknown messages, and although within the redoubt the shadows piled up and the air was damp and unpleasant "on the whole," wrote Giovanni Drogo, "I am very happy and am keeping well."

From nine in the evening until the dawn, a bell rang every half-hour in the fourth redoubt on the extreme right of the pass, where the walls ended. A little bell sounded and at once the furthest sentry called his neighbour; from him to the next man and so on to the far end of the walls the cry ran in the night, from redoubt to redoubt, across the Fort and through the bastions: Stand to, stand to!

The sentries put no enthusiasm into their call—they repeated it mechanically with a strange note in their voices.

Drogo did not undress but stretched himself out on his camp bed; he felt a growing desire to sleep and heard the cry come at intervals from far off. "To, to," was all that reached him. It grew louder and louder as it passed overhead, it reached its peak, then moved on into the distance to die away little by little in the void. Two minutes later it was there again, sent from the furthest outpost on the left, checking and rechecking. Drogo heard it approach once more at a slow and even pace: "To, to, to." It was only when it was above him and his own sentries repeated it that he could distinguish the words. But soon the "stand to" became blurred into a kind of lament which died away at last with the furthest sentry at the base of the crags.

Giovanni heard the call pass four times and run back along the ramparts four times to the point from which it had started. The fifth time only a vague resonance penetrated his consciousness and made him start slightly. He remembered that it was not a good thing for the officer of the guard to sleep; the regulations allowed it on condition that he did not undress but almost all the young officers in the Fort stayed awake all night in a mood of elegant bravado, smoking cigars, visiting each other against the rules and playing cards. Tronk, whom Giovanni had asked for guidance, had led him to understand that it was a good plan to stay awake.

As he lay stretched out on his camp bed beyond the circle of the oil lamp daydreaming over his own life Drogo was suddenly overcome by sleep. Meantime, that very night (had he but known it he might perhaps not have been inclined to sleep) that very night time began to slip by him beyond recall.

Up to then he had gone forward through the heedless season of early youth—along a road which to children seems infinite, where the years slip past slowly and with quiet pace so that no one notices them go. We walk along calmly, looking curiously around us; there is not the least need to hurry, no one pushes us on from behind and no one is waiting for us; our comrades, too, walk on thoughtlessly, and often stop to joke and play. From the houses, in the doorways, the grown-up people greet us kindly and point to the horizon with an understanding smile. And so the heart begins to beat with desires at once heroic and tender, we feel that we are on the threshold of the wonders awaiting us further on. As yet we do not see them, that is true—but it is certain, absolutely certain that one day we shall reach them.

Is it far yet? No, you have to cross that river down there, go over those green hills. Haven't we perhaps arrived already? Aren't these trees, these meadows, this white house perhaps what we were looking for? For a few seconds we feel that they are and we would like to halt there. Then someone says that it is better further on and we move off again unhurriedly.

So the journey continues; we wait trustfully and the days are long and peaceful. The sun shines high in the sky and it seems to have no wish to set.

But at a certain point we turn round, almost instinctively, and see that a gate has been bolted behind us, barring our way back. Then we feel that something has changed; the sun no longer seems to be motionless but moves quickly across the sky; there is barely time to find it when it is already falling headlong towards the far horizon. We notice that the clouds no longer lie motionless in the blue gulfs of the sky but flee, piled one above the other, such is their haste. Then we understand that time is passing and that one day or another the road must come to an end.

At a certain point they shut a gate behind us, they lock it with lightning speed and it is too late to turn back. But at that moment Giovanni Drogo was sleeping, blissfully unconscious, and smiling in his sleep like a child.

Some days will pass before Drogo understands what has happened. Then it will be like an awakening. He will look around him incredulously; then he will hear a din of footsteps at his back, will see those who awoke before him running hard to pass him by, to get there first. He will feel the pulse of time greedily beat out the measure of life. There will be no more laughing faces at the windows but unmoved and indifferent ones. And if he asks how far there is still to go they will, it is true, still point to the horizon—but not good-naturedly, not joyfully. Meanwhile his companions will disappear from view. One gets left behind, exhausted; another has outstripped the rest and is now no more than a tiny speck on the horizon.

Another ten miles—people will say—over that river and you will be there. Instead it never ends. The days grow shorter, the foot-travelers fewer; at the windows apathetic figures stand and shake their heads.

At last Drogo will be all alone and there on the horizon stretches a measureless sea, motionless, leaden.

Now he will be tired; nearly all the houses along the way will have their windows shut and the few persons he sees will answer him with a sad gesture. The good things lay further back—far, far back and he has passed them by without knowing it. But it is too late to turn back; behind him swells the hum of the following multitude urged on by the same illusion but still invisible on the white road.

At this moment Giovanni Drogo is sleeping in the third redoubt. He is smiling in his dreams. For the last time there come to him by night the sweet sights of a completely happy world. It is as well that he cannot see himself as he will one day be—there at the end of the road, standing on the shores of the leaden sea under a grey, monotonous sky. And around him there is not a house, not one human being, not a tree, not even a blade of grass. And so it has been since time immemorial.

VII

AT last the trunk with Lieutenant Drogo's kit arrived from the city. Amongst it there was a brand new cloak of extreme elegance. Drogo put it on and looked at himself inch by inch in the little mirror in his, own room. It seemed to him to be a living link with the world he had left and he thought with satisfaction how everyone would look at him, so splendid was the material, so proud its line.

He decided that he must not spoil it on duty, during the nights spent on guard or among the damp walls. It was even a bad omen to put it on for the first time up here as if admitting that he would not have better occasions. And yet he was sorry he could not show it off and although it was not cold he wanted to put it on, at least to go as far as the regimental tailor from whom he would buy an ordinary one.

So he left his room and set off down the stairs noting, when the light permitted, the elegance of his own shadow. Yet the further he descended into the heart of the Fort his cloak seemed somehow to lose its original splendour. Moreover he noticed that he did not manage to wear it naturally—as if there were something odd about it, something too conspicuous.

So he was glad that the stairs and corridors were almost deserted. When at last he met a captain the latter returned his salute without more than the necessary glance. Nor did the rare soldiers turn their eyes to look at him.

He went down a narrow winding stair cut out of the heart of the ramparts and his footsteps resounded above and below him as if there were others there. The rich folds of the cloak swung to and fro and struck the white mildew on the walls.

Thus Drogo arrived below ground; for the workshop of the tailor, Prosdocimo, was accommodated in a cellar. When the days were fine a ray of light shone down through a little window level with the ground, but that evening they had already lit the lights.

"Good evening, sir," said Prosdocimo, the regimental tailor, whenever he saw him come in. Only a few patches of the great room were lit up—a table at which an old man was writing, the bench where the three young assistants worked. All around scores upon scores of uniforms, greatcoats and cloaks, hung limply with

the sinister abandon of hanged men.

“Good evening,” Drogo replied, “I want a cloak; a fairly cheap cloak is what I want—something to last four months.”

“Let me see,” said the tailor with a smile at once inquisitive and suspicious, taking the hem of Drogo’s cloak and drawing it towards the light. His rank was that of sergeant-major, but by virtue of being tailor he could apparently allow himself a certain ironical familiarity with his superiors.

“Good material, very. You will have paid a fine price for it, I imagine, they don’t do things by halves down there in the city.”

He looked it all over like a craftsman then shook his head so that his full ruddy cheeks trembled.

“It’s a pity though,” he said.

“What’s a pity?”

“It’s a pity the collar is so low, so unmilitary.”

“That’s how they wear them nowadays,” said Drogo with superior air.

“Fashion will have the collar low,” said the tailor, “but for us soldiers fashion doesn’t count. Fashion must be according to the regulations and the regulations say ‘the collar of the cloak will be tight, stand up and be three inches high.’ Perhaps, sir, seeing me in this hole you think I am a very third class sort of tailor.”

“Why?” asked Drogo. “On the contrary, not a bit of it.”

“You probably think I am a very third-class sort of tailor. But many officers have a high opinion of me—in the city, too—important officers. I am here on a merely temporary basis,” and he measured out the syllables of the last three words as if it were a statement of great importance.

Drogo did not know what to say.

“I expect to leave any day,” Prosdocimo went on. “But that the colonel won’t let me go. . . . But what are you people laughing at?”

For in the shadows they had heard the stifled laughter of the three assistants. Now they had their heads bent and were exaggeratedly intent on their work. The old man went on writing and kept to himself.

“What is there to laugh at?” Prosdocimo repeated. “You’re a bit too smart, you people. You’ll find that out one of these days.”

“Yes,” said Drogo, “what is there to laugh at?”

“They are fools,” said the tailor, “it’s best to pay no attention to them.”

Here footsteps were heard coming down the stairs and a soldier appeared. Prosdocimo was wanted up-stairs by the sergeant-major in charge of the clothing store.

“Excuse me, sir,” said the tailor.

Drogo sat down and prepared to wait. Now that their master was gone, the three assistants had broken off their work. The old man at last raised his eyes from his papers, rose to his feet and limped over to Drogo.

“Did you hear?” he asked with a strange inflection, making a gesture to indicate the tailor who had left the room. “Did you hear him? Do you know, sir, how long he has been in the Fort?”

“I’ve no idea.”

“Fifteen years, sir, fifteen accursed years, and still he goes on repeating the same story—I am here on a temporary basis, I expect to go any day. . .”

At the assistants’ table someone muttered. This must be their daily butt. The old man paid not the slightest attention.

“But he will never move from here,” he said. “He and the commanding officer and lots of others will stay here till they’re done—it’s a kind of illness. You’re new, sir, watch out—you’re newly arrived; watch out while there is time.”

“Watch out for what?”

“See that you leave as soon as possible, that you don’t catch their madness.”

“I am here for only four mouths,” said Drogo, “I haven’t the slightest intention of staying.”

“Watch out all the same, sir,” said the old man. “It was Colonel Filimore who began it. Great events are coming, he began to tell me, I remember very well—it will be eighteen years ago. ‘Events,’ that was what he said. These were his words. He got it into his head that the Fort is tremendously important, much more important than all the others and that in the city they don’t understand.”

He spoke slowly so that there was time for silence to come between one word and another.

“He got it into his head that the Fort is tremendously important, that something was bound to happen.”

Drogo smiled.

“That something would happen? A war you mean?”

“Who knows—perhaps even a war.”

“A war from across the steppe.”

“Yes, probably from the steppe.”

“But tell me, who would come?”

“How should I know? Of course no one will come. But the colonel has studied the maps, he says there are still Tartars, the remains of an old army, he says, roaming up and down.”

From the shadow there came the idiotic sarcastic laughter of the assistants.

“They are still waiting for them,” the old man went on. “Take the colonel or

Captain Stizione or Captain Ortiz or the lieutenant-colonel—every year they say something must happen and so it will go on until they are retired.” He broke off and leant his head to one side as if he were listening. “I thought I heard steps,” he said. But there was no sound of anyone.

“I hear nothing,” said Drogo.

“Prosdocimo, too,” said the old man. “He’s only a sergeant-major—the regimental tailor, but he has joined up with them. For fifteen years he’s been waiting too. But you don’t believe it, sir, I see that, you don’t say anything and think it is nothing but a lot of stories.”

Almost imploringly he added:

“Watch out,” he said, “you will let them convince you, you’ll end up by staying here too, I have only to look into your eyes.”

Drogo was silent; it seemed to him beneath his dignity to confide in such a poor creature.

“And you,” he said, “what do you do?”

“Me?” said the old man. “I am his brother, I work here with him.”

“His brother? His elder brother?”

“That’s right,” and the old man smiled, “his elder brother. I was a soldier too, once—then I broke a leg and now I’m reduced to this.”

Then in the subterranean silence Drogo felt the throb of his own heart; it had begun to beat strongly. So even this old man hidden away in his lair in the cellar casting accounts—even this obscure and humble being looked forward to a heroic fate? Giovanni looked him in the eyes and the other shook his head a little with a mixture of sadness and bitterness, as if to indicate that there was indeed no remedy: “That is how we are made,” he seemed to say, “and we shall never get better.”

Perhaps because a door had been opened somewhere on the stairs one could now hear, filtering through the walls, distant voices coming from some indeterminable source. Every now and again they stopped and there was a break; soon they started again, coming and going like the slow breathing of the Fort.

At last Drogo had understood. He gazed at the multiple shadows of the uniforms hanging there—shadows which trembled with the flicker of the lights and thought that at that precise moment, the colonel in the secrecy of his study had opened the north window. It was quite certain—at a moment like this, so sad with darkness and autumn, the commandant of the Fort looked north, towards the black gulfs of the valley.

It was from the northern steppe that their fortune would come, their adventure, the miraculous hour which once at least falls to each man’s lot. Because of this remote possibility which seemed to become more and more

uncertain as time went on, grown men lived out their lives pointlessly here in the Fort.

They had not come to terms with ordinary life, with the joys of common people, with a mediocre destiny; they lived side by side, with the same hopes, never speaking of them because they were not aware of them or simply because they were soldiers who kept to themselves the intimacies of their hearts.

Perhaps Tronk too—probably so. Tronk followed the clauses of the regulations, the mathematical discipline, knew the pride of painstaking responsibility and deluded himself that that sufficed. Yet if they had said to him: “It will be like this all your life, always the same to the very end,” even he would have woken up. Impossible, he would say. Something different must come along, something truly worthy of him, so that he could say: Now it is over and I have done what I could.

Drogo had understood their simple secret and thought with relief that he was an outsider, an uncontaminated spectator. In four months’ time, thank God, he would leave them for ever. The obscure attractions of the old fortress had vanished ridiculously. So he thought. But why did the old man keep on looking at him with that ambiguous expression? Why did Drogo feel a desire to whistle softly, to drink some wine, to go into the open air? Was it perhaps to prove to himself that he was really free, really calm?

VIII

IT is dead of night and Drogo's new friends, Lieutenant Carlo Morel, Pietro Angustina, Francesco Grotta and Max Lagorio are sitting with him in the mess. There remain only an orderly leaning against the lintel of a distant door and the portraits of former colonels, deep in shadow, lining the walls. Eight bottles stand out darkly against the tablecloth among the disorderly remains of the dinner.

They are all somewhat excited—partly by the wine, partly by the night, and when their voices fall silent one can hear the rain outside.

The dinner is in honour of Count Max Lagorio who is leaving next day after two years in the Fort.

"Angustina," said Lagorio, "if you come too, I'll wait for you." He said it in his usual joking way but they knew it was true.

Angustina, too, had completed his two years' duty but he did not want to leave. Angustina was pale and sat with his usual air of detachment as if he were quite uninterested in them and were there by pure chance.

"Angustina," repeated Lagorio, almost shouting and on the verge of intoxication, "if you come too I'll wait for you—I'm willing to wait three days."

Lieutenant Angustina did not reply but gave a faint long-suffering smile. His blue sun-bleached uniform stood out among the others with a certain faded elegance.

Lagorio turned to the others—to Morel, to Grotta, to Drogo.

"You tell him, too," and he laid his right hand on Angustina's shoulder. "It would do him good to come to town."

"It would do me good?" asked Angustina, as if his curiosity were aroused.

"You would feel better in the city. All of them would, I think."

"I'm perfectly all right," said Angustina drily. "I don't need any treatment."

"I didn't say you needed treatment. I said it would do you good."

These were Lagorio's words and outside they heard the rain falling in the courtyard. Angustina smoothed his moustache with two fingers—he was obviously bored.

"Don't you ever think," Lagorio went on, "of your mother, of your people. Imagine if your mother . . ."

“My mother will get used to it,” answered Angustina with an undertone of bitterness.

Lagorio noticed it and changed the subject.

“Listen, Angustina, think of it—the day after tomorrow you turn up at Claudina’s. ‘I haven’t seen you for two years’ she’ll say.”

“Claudina,” said Angustina reluctantly. “Who’s she? I don’t remember.”

“Of course you don’t remember. It’s impossible to talk to you about anything that’s a fact. There’s no mystery about it, is there? People saw you together every day.”

“Ah,” said Angustina out of politeness, “now I remember. Yes, Claudina—do you know she won’t even remember that I exist.”

“Get away with you, we know they all go mad about you, don’t try to be modest now,” exclaimed Grotta and Angustina gazed at him without moving an eyelid, obviously struck by such bluntness.

They fell silent. Outside the sentries paced to and fro in the autumn rain. The water hissed on the terraces, gurgled in the gutters and streamed down the walls. Outside the night lay deep; Angustina had a slight fit of coughing. It seemed strange that a sound so disagreeable should proceed from such a refined young man. But he coughed with due restraint, lowering his head each time as if to indicate that he could not help it—that it was really something he had nothing to do with but which he must endure. So he transformed the cough into a kind of wilful habit for others to imitate.

Yet a painful silence had fallen; Drogo felt he must break it.

“Tell me, Lagorio,” he asked, “when do you leave tomorrow?”

“About ten, I think. I wanted to leave earlier but I have to say goodbye to the colonel.”

“The colonel gets up at five, summer and winter, so he won’t waste your time.”

Lagorio laughed.

“But I don’t get up at five. On my last morning at least I want to take it easy. No one is going to rush me.”

“So you will get there the day after tomorrow,” Morel observed enviously.

“It doesn’t seem possible to me, I can assure you,” said Lagorio.

“What doesn’t seem possible?”

“To be in the city in two days’ time,” he paused, “and for always, too.”

Angustina had become pale; he no longer smoothed his moustache but gazed into the shadow before him. The room was heavy with the thoughts which come by night, when fears emerge from the crumbling walls and unhappiness is sweet to savour, and over humanity, as it lies sleeping, the soul proudly beats its wings.

The glassy eyes of the colonels looking out of the great portraits foretold heroic deeds. And outside it still rained.

“Can you imagine it?” said Lagorio pitilessly to Angustina. “The evening of the day after tomorrow I shall probably be at Consalvi’s. The best society, music, pretty women.”

“If that is what you like,” Angustina answered contemptuously.

“Or else,” Lagorio continued with the best of intentions, merely to persuade his friend, “Yes, perhaps that is better—I shall go to Tron’s, to your uncle’s; there are nice people there and they play like gentlemen as Giacomo would say.”

“That’s fine, too,” said Angustina.

“In any case, said Lagorio, “the day after tomorrow I shall be enjoying myself and you will be on duty. I shall be walking about the city,” and he laughed at the idea, “and the captain of the day will come up to you. ‘Nothing to report—Private Martini is feeling ill.’ At two o’clock the sergeant will waken you: ‘Time to inspect the guard, sir.’ He will waken you at two, you can take an oath on it, and at that very minute I shall without a doubt be in bed with Rosaria.”

They were Lagorio’s usual silly, unintentional cruelties and everyone was used to them. But behind his words the image of the distant city appeared to his comrades with its palaces and its great churches, its airy domes and the romantic avenues along the river. Now, they thought, there would be a thin mist over it and the streetlamps would give a faint yellow light; this was the time when there were couples in the lonely streets, the cries of the coachmen under the lighted windows of the Opera, echoes of violins and laughter, women’s voices in the gloomy entries to the wealthy houses, and lighted windows incredibly high up among the labyrinthine roofs. It was the fascinating city of their youthful dreams, their still un-lived adventures.

Without being aware of it everyone was now watching Angustina’s face; it was heavy with a weariness to which he would not admit. They realised that they were not there to send off Lagorio but in reality to salute Angustina who alone would remain. One by one after Lagorio, as their turn came, the others too would go—Grotta, Morel and even before that Giovanni Drogo who had scarcely four months to do. But Angustina would stay on—why they did not know, but they perfectly understood it. And although they felt obscurely that on this occasion too he was conforming to his ambitious style of life they could not find it in them to envy him; it seemed to be nothing more than an absurd mania.

But why is Angustina, that damned snob, still smiling? Why, being as ill as he is, doesn’t he run and pack his kit and get ready to leave? Why is he staring instead into the shadows in front of him? What is he thinking about? What secret pride keeps him in the Fortress? Is he another? Look at him, Lagorio, you are his

friend, have a good look at him while you still have time, imprint his face on your memory as it is this evening with its thin nose, the lack-lustre expression of the eyes, its unpleasant smile; perhaps one day you will understand why he did not want to follow you, will understand what was locked behind his expressionless brow.

Lagorio left next morning. His two horses were waiting for him with his batman at the gate of the Fort. The sky was overcast but it was not raining.

Lagorio looked happy. He had left his room without so much as a glance at it, nor when he was in the open air did he look round at the Fort. The walls rose above, gloomy and beetling; the sentry at the gate was motionless; there was not a living soul on all the vast level space. From a little but which leant against the wall of the Fort there came the rhythmic beat of a hammer.

Angustina had come down to say goodbye to his friend. He stroked the horse. "It's still a fine beast," he said. Lagorio was going away, going down to the city, where life was easy and happy. But he was staying on; with expressionless eyes he watched his comrade busy with the horses and he tried to smile.

"I can't believe that I am leaving," said Lagorio. "This Fortress had become an obsession."

"Go and see my people when you get there," said Angustina, paying no attention to him. "Tell my mother I am well."

"Don't worry," replied Lagorio. And after a pause he added: "I'm sorry about yesterday evening, you know. We are quite different beings and I have never really understood what you were thinking. You seemed to have obsessions—I don't know—perhaps you were right."

"I had forgotten all about it," said Angustina laying his hand on the horse's flank and looking at the ground. "Of course I wasn't angry."

They were two different men with different tastes, separated by intelligence and culture. It was an astonishing thing even to see them together such was Angustina's superiority. And yet they were friends—of them all Lagorio was the only one to understand him instinctively, but he felt sorry for his comrade and was almost ashamed to leave before him as if it were unseemly ostentation and he could not make up his mind to go.

"If you see Claudina," Angustina went on with unaltered voice, "give her my regards—no, perhaps it's better if you say nothing."

"But if I see her she'll ask me. She knows that you are here."

Angustina said nothing.

"Well then," said Lagorio, who with the help of his batman had finished adjusting his saddle-bag, "perhaps I had better go, otherwise I shall be late.

Goodbye.”

He shook his friend’s hand and leapt elegantly into the saddle.

“Adieu, Lagorio,” exclaimed Angustina. “Bon voyage.”

Lagorio sat straight in his saddle and looked at him; he was not over intelligent but something told him obscurely that perhaps they might not meet again.

He struck in his spurs and the horse moved off. At this moment Angustina raised his right hand slightly as if to recall his companion, to ask him to stay another moment for he had one last thing to tell him. Lagorio saw the gesture out of the corner of his eye and halted a few yards away.

“What is it?” he asked. “Did you want something?”

But Angustina lowered his hand and resumed his previous indifferent pose.

“Nothing, nothing,” he replied. “Why?”

“Oh, I thought . . .” said Lagorio with a puzzled air and he rode off across the plateau rocking in his saddle.

IX

THE terraces of the Fort were white—so too were the valley to the south and the northern desert. The snow covered the whole width of the glaxis; along the crenellations it had laid a rim of white; it plunged from the gutters with a little hollow noise; every now and again for no apparent reason it detached itself from the sides of the precipices and terrible masses roared smoking down into the gulfs.

It was not the first snow but the third or fourth fall, and was a sign that many days had gone by. "It seems like yesterday that I arrived at the Fort," said Drogo, and so it did indeed. It seemed like yesterday and yet time had slipped away with its unvarying rhythm, no slower for the happy man nor quicker for the unlucky ones of this world.

Another three months had passed—passed neither slowly nor quickly. Christmas had faded from sight in the distance and the New Year had come, bringing mankind a few strangely hopeful minutes. Giovanni Drogo was already preparing to depart. He still had to have the medical inspection which Major Matti had promised him and then he would be able to go. He kept telling himself that this was a happy event, that in the city the life awaiting him was easy, amusing and perhaps happy, and yet he was not pleased.

On the morning of the tenth of January he entered the medical officer's room on the top floor of the Fort. The doctor was called Ferdinando Rovina; he was over fifty with a flabby, intelligent face, an air of tired resignation, and wore not a uniform but a long dark-jacket which made him look like some sort of magistrate. He was sitting at his table with various books and charts before him; he sat quite still and it was impossible to tell what his thoughts were.

The window looked out on to the courtyard from which there rose the sound of regular pacing to and fro because it was evening already and the changing of the guard was about to begin. From the window one caught sight of a part of the outer wall and the extraordinarily serene sky. The two officers saluted and Giovanni quickly saw that the doctor was fully informed of his case.

"The ravens are nesting and the swallows are going," said Rovina jokingly, and he produced from a drawer a sheet of paper with something printed on it.

"Perhaps you do not know, doctor, that I came here by mistake," answered

Drogo.

"My dear hey, everyone comes here by mistake," said the doctor gloomily. "That applies to everyone more or less—even to those who have stayed on."

Drogo did not quite know what he meant and confined himself to a smile.

"Oh, I'm not blaming you. You are quite right, you young people, not to moulder up here," Rovina went on, "there are far better chances down in the city. Sometimes I think myself that if I could . . ."

"Why not?" asked Drogo, "couldn't you get a transfer?"

The doctor waved his hand as if he could not believe his ears.

"Get a transfer?" and he laughed heartily, "after being up here for twenty-five years? It's too late, my boy, I should have thought of it sooner."

Perhaps he wanted Drogo to contradict him again, but since the lieutenant said nothing he began to talk business. He invited Giovanni to sit down, made him give his name and surname which he wrote in the prescribed place on the form according to the regulations.

"Well then," he concluded, "you suffer from a cardiac disorder, don't you? Your system doesn't stand up to the height, isn't that it? Shall we say that?"

"Yes, let's say that," Drogo assented. "You are the best judge of these things."

"Shall we prescribe convalescent leave while we're at it?" said the doctor, winking.

"Thank you," said Drogo, "but I don't want to overdo things."

"Just as you like. No leave. At your age I had no such scruples."

Instead of sitting down Giovanni had gone over to the window and every now and then looked down on the soldiers drawn up on the white snow. The sun had barely set; a blue shadow had spread over the walls. "After three or four months, more than half of you people want to get away," the doctor was saying with a certain sadness in his voice; he too was now wrapped in shadow so that it was difficult to see how he could write. "If I could have my time again I would do the same. Yet it's a pity."

Drogo listened without interest, so intent was he on looking from the window. Then he seemed to see the yellowing walls of the courtyard rise up into the crystal sky, with above them, higher still, solitary towers, crooked battlements crowned with snow, airy outworks and redoubts which he had never seen before. A bright light from the west still illuminated them and thus they shone with an inscrutable life. Never before had Drogo noticed that the Fort was so complicated and immense. At an almost incredible height he saw a window—or perhaps a loophole open on to the valley. Up there there must be men whom he did not know—perhaps even an officer like himself with whom he could be friends. In the abyss between bastion and bastion he saw geometrical shadows,

frail bridges suspended among the rooftops, strange postern gates barred and flush with the walls, ancient machicolations now blocked up, long roof-trees curved with the years.

Against the dark blue background of the courtyard he saw in the light of lanterns and torches soldiers of great height and proud bearing unsheath their bayonets. On the brightness of the snow they formed black, immobile files, as if made of iron. They were very beautiful to see and stood like stone while a trumpet began to sound. The blasts spread through the air, gleaming and alive, and struck straight into the heart.

“One by one you all go away,” Rovina was murmuring in the dusk, “we will end up by being left by ourselves, we old ones. This year . . .”

Down in the courtyard the trumpet was calling, the pure sound of brass and human voice together. It shook once more, warlike and dashing. When it fell silent it left even in the doctor’s office an enchantment no words could describe. The silence became such that you could hear someone’s long pace crunch on the frozen snow. The colonel had come down in person to take the salute. Three trumpet calls, of extraordinary beauty, cleft the sky.

“Who is there of you?” the doctor continued his recriminations. “Lieutenant Angustina is the only one. Even Morel, I bet he will have to go down to the city next year to be looked after. I bet he finishes by falling ill too.”

“Morel?” Drogo could not help replying if only to show that he was listening. “Morel ill?” he asked, without grasping the last words.

“Oh no,” said the doctor. “It’s a manner of speaking.”

Even through the closed window they heard the steps of the colonel. In the dusk the lines of bayonets were silver bars. From impossibly far off there came the echo of trumpets—perhaps the first call sent back by the labyrinth of the walls.

The doctor was silent. Then he rose and said:

“Here is the certificate. I’ll go now and get it signed by the commandant.”

He folded the paper and put it in a file, took down his great coat and a great fur cap.

“Are you coming too?” he asked. “What on earth are you looking at?”

The new guards were moving off one by one to the various parts of the Fort. The rhythm of their steps made a dull noise on the snow, but overhead flew the music of the fanfares. Then, strange as it might seem, the walls—already beleaguered by the night—rose slowly towards the zenith and from their topmost height, framed with patches of snow, white clouds began to rise like great birds sailing between the stars.

The memory of his native city passed through Drogo’s mind—a vague image

of noisy streets in the rain, of plaster statues, of damp barracks, tuneless bells, tired and misshapen faces, endless afternoons, dirty dusty ceilings.

But here the deep mountain night was approaching with clouds flying up over the Fort, harbingers of wonders to come. And from the north, from the north invisible there behind the ramparts, Drogo felt the onset of his own destiny.

The doctor was already in the doorway.

“Doctor, doctor,” said Drogo, almost stammering, “I am all right.”

“I know,” answered the doctor, “What did you think?”

“I’m all right,” Drogo repeated almost unable to recognise his own voice, “I’m all right and want to stay.”

“Stay here in the Fort? You don’t want to leave any more? What has happened to you?”

“I don’t know,” said Giovanni, “but I can’t leave.”

“Oh,” exclaimed Rovina coming up to him, “if you’re serious then I assure you I am glad.”

“I’m quite serious,” said Drogo who felt his state of exaltation change into a strange pain which was near to happiness. “Doctor, throw away that form.”

X

IT was bound to come to this—had perhaps been destined long before on that distant day when, along with Ortiz, Drogo first came on to the plateau and the Fort appeared to him under the burden of the bright midday.

Drogo has decided to stay; what keeps him there is a longing, but more than that alone—for perhaps the heroic cast of his thoughts itself would not have sufficed. For the time being he thinks he has done something noble, and is genuinely surprised to find himself a better man than he had thought. Only many months later, looking around him, will he recognise the paltry ties which bind him to the Fort.

Suppose the trumpets had sounded, suppose he had heard martial songs, suppose disturbing messages had come from the north—if that had been all there was to it Drogo would have left just the same; but he had within him dull sluggishness—born of habit, military vanity, love for the accustomed walls which were his home; Four months passing with the monotonous rhythm of routine duties had been enough to entammel him.

He had got used to guard duties, which the first few times had seemed an unbearable burden; little by little he had learned the rules, the turns of speech, the whims of his superiors, the topography of the redoubts, the sentry-posts, the corners out of the wind, what the trumpets said. He derived a special pleasure from his mastery of the routine and savoured the growing respect of soldiers and N.C.O.'s; even Tronk had noticed that Drogo was serious and painstaking and 'had' almost come to like him.

He had got used to his colleagues—he now knew them so well that even their most subtle hints did not take him unawares; and in the evening they sat together chatting about what went on in the city—of events which by their very distance had become of exaggerated importance. He had got used to the good and comfortable mess, the welcoming fire in the anteroom always lit day and night; the attentions of his batman—a good creature called Geronimo—who had little by little learned his particular wishes.

He had got used to the trips every so often with Morel to the nearest village, a good two hours on horseback through a narrow valley which by now he knew by heart—an inn where there were new faces to be seen at last, lavish dinners and

the fresh laughter of girls with whom one could make love.

He had got used to the wild races up and down the level ground behind the Fort where on free afternoons he vied with his comrades in dashing horsemanship, and to the patient games of chess in the evenings which Drogo often won; but Captain Ortiz told him: "It's always like that, the new people always win to begin with. It happens to them all—they think they are really good but it's really only a question of novelty; then the others learn our system too and one fine day we can do nothing right anymore."

Drogo had got used to his room, to reading quietly at night, to the crack in the ceiling above his bed which looked like a Turk's head, to the dripping of the cistern—become friendly with time—to the hollow his body moulded in the mattress, to the blankets which in the early days had seemed so inhospitable and were now gently expectant, to the movement now instinctive and precisely measured by which he put out the oil lamp or laid his book on his little table. He now knew how to place himself in the morning as he shaved before the mirror so that the light would fall on his face from the correct angle, how to pour water from the ewer into the basin without spilling, how to open the wayward lock of a drawer by holding the key down a little.

He had got used to the creaking of the door when it rained, to the point, where moonlight fell through the window and its slow shifting with the passage of the hours, to the hubbub every night in the room beneath his at half past one precisely when the old wound in Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolosi's right leg awoke mysteriously and interrupted his sleep.

All these things had now become part of himself and it would have hurt him to leave them. But Drogo did not know, he did not suspect, that his departure would have been an effort nor that life in the Fort would swallow up the days one after another, one exactly like the other, at a giddy speed. Yesterday and the day before it were the same; he could no longer have distinguished one from the other. Something which happened three days before or three weeks before seemed equally distant. Thus unknown to him time fled on its way.

But for the time being here he is, cocksure and heedless, on the ramparts of the fourth redoubt on a pure frosty night. Because of the cold the sentries kept pacing up and down without pause and their steps crunched on the frozen snow. A great moon of extraordinary whiteness lit the world. The Fort, the crags, the rocky valley to the north were flooded with wonderful light—even the curtain of mist which hung in the extreme north shone with it.

Down below in the room set aside for the orderly officer, in the heart of the redoubt, the lamp had been left burning; the flame shook slightly and rocked the shadows. Shortly Drogo had begun to write a letter; he had, to reply to Maria,

Vescovi's sister, his friend's sister, who might one day be his bride. But after completing two lines he had got up—even he did not know why—and had climbed on to the roof to look out.

This was the lowest stretch of the fortifications corresponding to the deepest point in the defile. Here in the ramparts there was the gate through which the two states communicated with each other. From time immemorial the massive, ironshod portals had not been opened. And the guard for the New Redoubt went out and in every day by a postern, barely wide enough for one man and guarded by a sentry.

It was the first time Drogo had mounted guard in the fourth redoubt. As soon as he came out into the open he looked at the overhanging rocks to the right, all encrusted with ice and gleaming in the moonlight.

Gusts of wind began to bear little white clouds across the sky and shook Drogo's cloak, the new cloak which meant so much to him.

Without moving he gazed at the barrier of rocks before him, the impenetrable distances of the north, and the ends of his cloak rustled like a flag and assumed wild forms. That night Drogo felt he possessed a proud and soldierly beauty, upright on the edge of the terrace with his fine cloak shaken by the wind. Tronk at his side, wrapped up in a wide greatcoat, seemed no soldier at all.

"Tell me, Tronk," asked Giovanni with an assumed air of concern, "Is it only an impression or is the moon bigger than usual tonight?"

"I don't think so, sir," said Tronk, "It always gives that impression up here at the Fort!"

Their voices echoed afar as if the air were made of glass. Tronk, seeing that the lieutenant had nothing more to say, went off along the edge of the terrace bent as always on checking the routine.

Drogo remained alone and felt almost happy. He relished with pride his determination to remain, the bitter pleasure of leaving the little assured happinesses for something which a long time hence might perhaps prove to be good and great—and underneath there was the consoling thought that there was always time still to leave.

A presentiment—or was it only a hope?—of great and noble events had made him stay up here, but perhaps he had merely postponed things; at bottom nothing was settled. He had so much time before him. All the good things of life seemed to await him. What need was there to exert on self? Even women, these strange and loveable creatures, he looked forward to as a certain happiness, formally promised him by the normal course of life.

How much time there was before him! A single year seemed immensely long and the good years had barely begun—they seemed to form a long, long series of

which it was impossible to see the end, a treasure still intact and so great that one might tire of it.

There was no one to say to him: "Watch out, Giovanni Drogo." Life seemed to him to be inexhaustible—the illusion was obstinate although youth had already begun to fade. But Drogo had no knowledge of time. Even if he had had before him hundreds and hundreds of years of youth that, too, would have seemed no great thing to him. And instead he had at his disposal only an ordinary simple life, a short human youth, a miserly gift which could be counted on the fingers of two hands and which would slip away before he had even got to know it.

What a long time there was before him, he thought. And yet—so he had heard tell—men exist who at a certain point, strange to say, begin to wait for death—death, which everyone knows about but which is quite absurd and cannot possibly concern them. Drogo smiled to think of it and as he did so, urged on by the cold, he began to walk up and down.

At that point the ramparts followed the slope of the valley and so formed a complicated staircase of terraces and platforms. Below him, pitch-black against the snow, Drogo saw the various sentries by the light of the moon; their methodical pacing made a creaking noise on the frozen ground.

The nearest of them, on a lower terrace ten yards or so away, feeling the cold less than the others, stood motionless with his shoulders leant against a wall so that it looked as if he were sleeping. But Drogo heard him singing a lament to himself in a low voice.

It was a succession of words, which Drogo could not make out, strung together by a monotonous and unending tune. Speaking, and worse still, singing on duty was severely forbidden. Giovanni should have punished him but instead took pity on him, thinking of the cold and the loneliness of the night. Then he began to descend a short staircase which lead on to the terrace and gave a slight cough to put the soldier on his guard.

The sentinel turned his head and seeing the officer corrected his posture but did not interrupt his lament. Drogo was overcome with rage—did these men think they could make a fool of him? He would give him a taste of something.

The sentry at once remarked Drogo's threatening attitude and although the formality of giving the password, by an ancient tacit agreement, was not used between soldiers and the guard commander he had an excess of scruple. Raising his rifle he asked with the peculiar accent used in the Fort: "Who goes there? Who goes there?"

Drogo stopped short, thrown off his balance. In the clear light of the moon he

could see the soldier's face perfectly clearly perhaps less than five yards away and the mouth was shut. But the lament had not been interrupted. Where did it come from then, that voice?

Since the soldier stood there and waited, Giovanni, pondering the strange phenomenon, mechanically gave the password: "Miracle." "Misery," replied the sentry and stood at ease again.

There followed an immense silence in which the muttered words and song drifted more loudly than before. At last Drogo understood and a slight shiver ran along his spine. It was water, that was what it was—a distant cascade dashing down the steep sides of the crags. The wind causing the great jet to quiver, the mysterious play of the echoes, the varying sounds of the struck rocks made of it a human voice which spoke and spoke—spoke of our life in words which one was within a hair's breadth of understanding but never did.

So it was not the soldier who was singing under his breath, not a man sensitive to cold, to punishments and to love, but the hostile mountain. What a terrible mistake, thought Drogo, perhaps everything is like that—we think there are beings like ourselves around us and instead there is nothing but ice and stones speaking a strange language; we are on the point of greeting a friend but our arm falls inert, the smile dies away because we see that we are completely alone.

The wind blows against the officer's splendid cloak and the blue shadow on the snow waves, too, like a flag. The sentry stands motionless. The moon moves on and on, slowly but not losing a single moment, impatient for the dawn. In Giovanni Drogo's breast his heart beats hollowly.

XI

ALMOST two years later Giovanni Drogo was sleeping one night in his room in the Fort. Twenty-two months had passed without bringing anything fresh and he had stayed there waiting, as if life could not but be specially lenient with him. Yet twenty-two months are a long time and a lot of things can happen in them—there is time for new families to be formed, for babies to be born and even begin to talk, for a great house to rise where once there was only a field, for a beautiful woman to grow old and no one desire her any more, for an illness—for a long illness—to ripen (yet men live on heedlessly), to consume the body slowly, to recede for short periods as if cured, to take hold again more deeply and drain away the last hopes; there is time for a man to die and be buried, for his son to be able to laugh again and in the evenings take the girls down the avenues and past the cemetery gates without a thought.

But it seemed as if Drogo's existence had come to a halt. The same day, the same things, had repeated themselves hundreds of times without taking a step forward. The river of time flowed over the Fort, crumbled the walls, swept down. dust and fragments of stone, wore away the stairs and the chains, but over Drogo it passed in vain—it had not yet succeeded in catching him, bearing him with it as it flowed.

And this night, too, would have been like all the others if Drogo had not had a dream. He was a child again; it was night and he was standing at a window.

To one side the house fell away and opposite, across the space he saw in the moonlight the facade of a sumptuous palace. And the attention of the little boy who was Drogo was all intent on a high narrow window crowned by a coping of marble. The moon, shining through the glass, fell on a table on which there was a runner, a vase and a few ivory statuettes. And the few things he could see made him imagine that in the dark, behind them, there opened out the intimate secrets of a great salon, the first of an unending series, full of precious things, and that the whole palace slept that profound intriguing sleep of buildings whose owners are both rich and happy. How wonderful, thought Drogo, to be able to live in these salons, to wander through them for hours discovering ever new treasures.

Meanwhile between the window where he stood and the wonderful palace there was perhaps twenty yards between them frail apparitions had begun to

float (some sort of fairy creature perhaps) trailing behind them trains of velvet which gleamed in the moon.

In his dream the presence of such beings, which he had never seen in the real world, did not surprise Giovanni. They floated through the air, whirling gently, and returned again and again to brush past the narrow window.

By their nature they seemed logically to belong to the palace, but the fact that they paid not the slightest attention to Drogo, never once approached his house, mortified him. So the fairies, too, kept away from common children and had time only for people blessed: by fortune, who did not even stand watching but slept indifferently under silken baldachins.

“Hist,” said Drogo two or three times timidly to attract the attention of the apparitions, although he knew quite well in his heart that it would be useless. And indeed not one of them seemed to hear, none of them drew even a few feet nearer to his window.

But suddenly one of these magic beings caught at the sill of the window opposite with what seemed to be its arm and knocked gently on the glass as if calling someone.

Only a few minutes had passed when a slight figure—how small it was in comparison with the immense window—appeared behind the panes and Drogo recognised Angustina, who was a child too.

Angustina, who was strikingly pale, wore a little velvet dress with a collar of white lace and seemed far from pleased with the silent serenade.

Drogo thought that, if only out of courtesy, his comrade would have invited him to play with the phantoms. But no. Angustina seemed not to notice his friend and did not even look round when Drogo called him: “Angustina! Angustina!”

Instead, with a tired gesture, his friend opened the window and leant out to the spirit which clung to the sill as if they knew each other and he had something to tell it. The spirit made a sign and, following the direction in which it pointed, Drogo turned his gaze to a great square which stretched out in front of the houses, completely deserted. Across this square a little procession of spirits advanced, some thirty feet above the ground, bearing a litter.

Formed, apparently, from the same substance as themselves, the litter overflowed with veils and plumes. With his usual expression of detachment and boredom Angustina watched it approach; evidently it came for him.

The injustice of it struck Drogo to the heart. Why did Angustina get everything and he nothing? With someone-else it would not have mattered—but with Angustina who was always so proud and arrogant! Drogo looked at the other windows to see whether there were someone who might perhaps intervene

for him—but he could see no one.

At last the litter stopped, swaying directly in front of the window and all the phantoms clustered around it suddenly in a wavering circle. All were turned towards Angustina—no longer obsequiously but with avid and almost malignant curiosity. Left abandoned, the litter remained in mid-air as if suspended from invisible threads.

Suddenly Drogo felt all envy drain from him for he knew what was happening. He saw Angustina standing upright at the window and his eyes fix themselves on the litter. Yes, it was for him they had come tonight, the fairy messengers, but on what an errand! So the litter had to serve for a long journey and would not come back before the dawn, nor the next night, nor the next night again, nor ever. The salons of the palace would await their master in vain, a woman's hands would cautiously close the window which the fugitive had left open and all the others too would be bolted to brood in the dark over the lamenting and desolation.

So the phantoms, which had seemed so friendly, had not come to play with the moonbeams, they had not come like innocent creatures from scented gardens, but derived from the abyss.

Other children would have cried, would have called on their mothers, but Angustina was not afraid and talked calmly with the spirits as if to clear up some points of ceremonial. Clustered round the window like a drift of foam, they climbed on top of each other, pressing forward towards the child and nodding to him as if to say: "Yes, yes, we quite agree." At last the spirit which had been the first to cling to the sill—perhaps their leader—made a slight imperious gesture. Still with his air of boredom Angustina climbed over the window sill—he seemed already to have become as light as the phantoms—and sat in the litter like a great gentleman, and crossed his legs. The cluster of phantoms dissolved in a fluttering of veils; the enchanted litter moved gently off.

A procession formed—the apparitions carried out a semicircular evolution between the wings of the houses before rising into the sky towards the moon. As they wheeled in the semicircle the litter, too, passed close to Drogo's window; waving his arm he tried to shout his last greeting: "Angustina, Angustina."

Then at last his friend turned his head towards Giovanni and looked at him for a moment or two—and to Drogo it seemed as if he could read in his glance an excessive air of seriousness for such a small child. But slowly Angustina's face unfolded in a smile of complicity as if he and Drogo could understand a great deal the phantoms did not know—a last desire to make a joke, the final opportunity to show that he, Angustina, did not need anyone's pity. This was an ordinary occurrence, he seemed to say there was nothing to be surprised at.

As the litter bore him off, Angustina looked away from Drogo and turned his head to the front, in the direction of the procession, with a sort of curiosity which was at once amused and distrustful. It was as if he were experimenting for the first time with a toy which did not interest him in the slightest but which for appearance sake he could not have refused.

Thus he went off into the night with almost inhuman nobility. He gave not one glance at his palace, nor at the square before it nor at the other houses nor at the city where he had lived. The procession wound slowly through the sky, rising higher and higher; then it became a confused streak, then a wisp of mist, then nothing.

The window had remained open, the rays of the moon still illumined the table, the vase, the ivory statuettes, which had continued to sleep. Inside, in another room, on a bed by the trembling light of the tapers, lay perhaps a tiny lifeless body whose face was like Angustina's; and it would be wearing a little velvet dress, a big lace collar and a smile frozen on the white lips.

XII

NEXT day Giovanni Drogo was guard commander in the New Redoubt. It was an outlying fortress three-quarters of an hour from the main fort set on top of a rocky cone commanding the Tartar steppe. It was the most important keep, was completely isolated and had the task of giving the alarm if any threat approached.

Drogo left the fort in the evening in command of some seventy men—all that number of soldiers was needed because there were ten sentry posts without counting the two gunners. It was the first time he had set foot beyond the pass; to all intents and purposes the frontier had been crossed.

Giovanni was thinking of the responsibilities of his task, but in particular he was pondering over his dream about Angustina. It was a dream which had awakened in his heart something that would not die away. It seemed to him that there must be some obscure link there with future events; yet he was not particularly superstitious.

They entered the New Redoubt; the sentries were relieved, then the old guard marched off and at the edge of the parapet Drogo stood watching them move away along the rough stony path. From there the Fort looked like an immensely long wall—a mere wall with nothing behind it. The sentries could not be distinguished for they were too far off. Only the flag could be seen now and again when the wind shook it.

For twenty-four hours the sole commander in the solitary redoubt would be Drogo. Whatever happened no aid could be asked for. Even if enemy came, the fortress had to look after itself. For twenty-four hours the king himself was of less account than Drogo.

As he waited for night to come, Giovanni stayed and watched the northern steppe. From the Fort he had been able to see of it only a little triangle because of the mountains in front. But now he could see it all, right to the limits of the horizon where there hung the usual barrier of mist. It was a sort of desert, rock-covered, with here and there thickets of low dusty bushes. To the right, far, far away, there was a dark strip which might well have been a forest. On either flank harsh chains of mountains. They were immensely beautiful, some of them, with sheer unending ramparts and their crests white with the first autumn snows. And

yet no one looked at them; everyone—Drogo and the soldiers—tended to look instinctively towards the north, towards the desolate steppe, which had mystery but no meaning.

Whether it was the thought of being completely alone in command of the fortress, or the sight of the uninhabited country or the memory of his dream about Angustina, Drogo began to feel a slight feeling of anxiety grow upon him as night spread.

It was an October evening, the weather unsettled; with splashes of reddish light scattered here and there on the ground, reflected from some unknown source and slowly swallowed up by the leaden twilight.

As usual at sunset a kind of poetic excitement came over Drogo. At this hour he was always full of hope and he began to meditate once more upon the heroic fantasies he had so often put together on the long spells of guard duty and each day, adding new details, had made more perfect. Usually he imagined a desperate battle which he and a few men had joined against an innumerable enemy, as if that night the New Redoubt had been besieged by thousands of Tartars. For days and days he held out. Almost all his comrades were dead or wounded. He too had been struck by a missile—a serious wound but not too serious, one which allowed him still to retain command. But now the cartridges are running out—he attempts a sortie at the head of the last men—he has a bandage round his brow; then at last reinforcements arrive; the enemy disbands and turns to flight; he falls exhausted clutching his blood-stained sabre. But someone is calling him.

“Lieutenant Drogo, Lieutenant Drogo,” someone calls and shakes him back to life. And Drogo slowly opens his eyes—the King, the King. in person is bending over him and says: “Well done!”

At this hour he was always full of hope and he thought over these heroic tales, tales which probably would never come true but still served to make life worth living. Sometimes he was more easily satisfied—he gave up the idea of being the only hero, gave up the wound, gave up the idea that the King said to him “Well done.” After all it need only be an ordinary battle—one single battle but a real one, so that he could charge in full uniform and smile as he rushed towards the inscrutable faces of the enemy. One battle and perhaps then he would be happy for the rest of his life.

But that evening it was not easy to feel heroic. The world was already shrouded in shadow; the northern plain had lost all colour but had not yet fallen asleep—as if it were giving birth to sorrow.

It was already eight in the evening and the sky had filled with clouds when it seemed to Drogo that he could see a little black spot moving in the plain, slightly

to his right and immediately below the redoubt. "My eyes must be tired," he thought, "I have been looking so long that my eyes are tired and I am seeing specks." The same thing had happened to him once before when he was a boy and was sitting up at night studying.

He tried keeping his eyelids closed for a second or two then looked at things around him; at a bucket which must have been used for washing the terrace, at an iron hook in the wall, at a small bench which the officer on duty before him must have carried up to sit on. It was only after a few minutes that he turned to look down to where he had first seemed to see the tiny black spot. It was still there and was moving a little.

"Tronk," Drogo called in an excited voice.

"Sir?" he replied immediately, his voice so close that it made Drogo start.

"Ah, there you are," said Drogo recovering himself, "Tronk, I don't want to make any mistake but it seems to me—it seems I can see something moving down there."

"Yes, sir," Tronk replied in a regulation voice. "I have had it under observation for some minutes."

"What?" said Drogo, "You have seen it too? What do you see?"

"The thing that is moving about, sir."

Drogo felt a surge of panic. This is it, at last, he thought, completely forgetting his warlike fantasies, it had to happen to me—now something terrible will happen.

"So you have seen it, too?" he asked again in the absurd hope that the other would deny it.

"Yes, sir," said Tronk, "for about ten minutes. I had gone down to see that the cannon were clean and when I came up again I saw it."

Both were silent. Even for Tronk it must have, been something strange and disturbing.

"What do you say it is, Tronk?"

"I can't make out. It moves too slowly."

"How do you mean, too slowly?"

"Well, I thought it might be the tufts of the canes."

"Canes, what canes?"

"There is a clump of canes down there at the very bottom," he pointed to his right but it was useless for in the dark nothing could be seen. "They are a kind that have black tufts at this time of year. Sometimes the wind blows them away, these tufts, and since they are light they fly off—they look like little puffs of smoke. But it can't be that," he added after a pause, "they would move more quickly."

“What can it be then?”

“I don’t know,” said Tronk. “It would be odd if they were men. They would come another way. And then it keeps on moving—that’s what I can’t understand.”

At that moment a sentry gave the alarm, then another and another again. They too had seen the black speck. At once the soldiers who were off duty came running from within the redoubt. They crowded on the parapet, curious and slightly afraid.

“Don’t you see it?” Said one. “But there it is, right under here, now it’s standing still.”

“It will be mist,” said another. “Sometimes there are gaps in the mist and you see through it, see what’s behind it. It looks as if it were someone moving and it is only gaps in the mist.”

“Yes, yes, now I see it,” they said. “There’s still something black there—it’s a black stone, that’s what it is.”

“Of course it isn’t a stone. Don’t you see that it is still moving? Are you blind?”

“It’s a stone, I tell you. I’ve always seen it there—a black stone that looks like a nun.”

Someone laughed.

“Get out of here, get back inside,” Tronk interrupted taking the initiative, since all the voices drove the lieutenant to a pitch of excitement. Reluctantly the soldiers withdrew into the redoubt and silence fell again.

“Tronk,” Drogo suddenly asked, being incapable of deciding alone. “Would you give the alarm?”

“You mean the alarm to the Fort? Fire a shot you mean, sir?”

“Oh, ‘I don’t know. Do you think it’s a case for giving the alarm?’”

Tronk shook his head.

“I would wait till we can see better. If we fire a shot they will get excited at the Fort. Then suppose there’s nothing there?”

“That’s true,” admitted Drogo.

“And then,” Tronk added, “it would be contrary to the regulations, too. The regulations say that the alarm must be given only in case of a threat, that’s what they say—in the case of a threat or of the appearance of armed forces and in all cases in which suspicious persons approach within a hundred yards of the terrace or the walls.’—that’s what the regulations say.”

“That’s true,” said Giovanni, “and that’s more than a hundred yards, isn’t it?”

“I would say so too,” said Tronk approvingly. “And then how do we know that it is a person?”

“What do you think it is, then? A ghost?” said Drogo with a touch of annoyance.

Tronk did not reply.

As if suspended in the depth of the night Drogo and Tronk stood leaning on the parapet, gazing down to where the Tartar steppe began. The enigmatic patch of darkness seemed to be motionless, as if it were sleeping, and little by little Giovanni began to think again that there really was nothing there, only a black boulder like a nun, and that his eyes had been deceived—a touch of fatigue, that was all, a silly hallucination. Now he felt a certain bitterness, a dark shadow, such as come when moments of destiny pass us by without touching us and the noise of their passing dies away in the distance while we remain alone amid a swirl of dead leaves lamenting the great—and terrible—opportunity we have lost.

But then as the night went on the breath of fear began to rise from the dark valley. As the night went on Drogo felt himself little and alone. Tronk was too different from himself to serve as a friend. If only he had his comrades with him, even only one of them, then it would have been different. He would even have felt like joking and it would have been no hardship to await the dawn.

Meanwhile tongues of mist were forming on the steppe, pale archipelagos on the black ocean. One of them came to rest at the very foot of the redoubt, hiding the mysterious object. The air had become damp, Drogo’s mantle hung from his shoulders limp and heavy.

What a long night. Drogo had already lost hope of its ever ending when the sky began to pale and cold blasts announced that the dawn was not far off. It was then that sleep overtook him. As he stood leaning against the parapet, Drogo twice let his head droop, twice he righted it with a start; at last it fell over inertly and his eyelids surrendered to the weight. The new day was being born.

He woke because someone was touching his arm. Slowly he emerged from his dreams, dazzled by the light. A voice, Tronk’s voice, was saying to him: “It’s a horse, sir.”

Then he recalled his life, the Fort, the New Redoubt, the enigma of the black patch. He looked quickly down, eager to know the answer, with a cowardly desire to see nothing but stones and bushes—nothing but the steppe, lonely and empty as it had always been.

But the voice kept repeating: “It’s a horse, sir.” And Drogo saw it, standing unbelievably at the foot of the rocks.

It was a horse, not big but low and plump, with a strange beauty in its thin legs and flowing mane. It was of an odd build but most remarkable for its colouring—a gleaming black which was like a dark stain on the landscape.

Where had it come from? Whose was it? For years and years no living thing, unless it were a raven or snake, had ventured there. But now a horse had appeared and you could see at once that it was not a wild one, but a picked beast, a real charger—except perhaps that the legs were a little too thin.

It was extraordinary and puzzling. Drogo, Tronk, the sentries, and the other soldiers at the loopholes in the floor beneath could not take their eyes off it. It broke the rules, this horse, and brought back the legends of the north, of Tartars and battles and filled the entire desert with its illogical presence.

By itself it was not of great importance but you could see that there must be something else behind it. Its saddle was in order as if it had been ridden little before. So here there was an unfinished story—what had up to yesterday evening been an absurd, a ridiculous superstition might be true then. Drogo seemed to feel them, the mysterious Tartars, lurking among the bushes, in the crevices of the rocks, motionless and silent with clenched teeth. They were waiting for the dark to attack. And meantime others were arriving, a threatening swarm coming slowly out of the northern mists. They had no hands nor songs, no gleaming swords, no fine banners. Their arms were dull so as not to glint in the sun and their horses were trained not to neigh.

But a pony—this was their immediate thought in the New Redoubt—a pony had escaped from the enemy, had run on to betray them. Probably they had not noticed because the animal had run away from their encampment during the night.

So the horse had brought valuable intelligence. But what start did it have on the enemy? Drogo could not inform the Fort until evening and in the meantime the Tartars could move up.

Should he give the alarm then? Tronk said no—after all it was only a horse, he said. The fact that it had reached the foot of the redoubt might mean that it had been left, perhaps its master was a solitary hunter who had ventured imprudently into the steppe and had fallen ill or died. The horse, left to itself, had gone in search of safety, had detected the presence of men in the direction of the Fort and was now waiting for them to bring it some forage.

This was what really made him have serious doubts that an army was approaching. What motive could the animal have had for running away from an encampment in such inhospitable country? And then, Tronk said, he had heard tell that the Tartars' horses were almost all white—even in an old picture hung in one of the rooms in the Fort the Tartars were mounted on white steeds; but this one was coal-black.

So Drogo; after many hesitations, decided to await the evening. Meanwhile the sky had cleared and the sun shone over the landscape and warmed the hearts

of the soldiers. Even Giovanni felt himself take heart from the bright light—his fantasies about the Tartars became less solid, everything resumed its normal proportions, the horse was only a horse and one could find all sorts of explanations for its presence without postulating enemy raids. Having forgotten the fears of the night, he suddenly felt himself ready for any adventure and the presentiment that his moment of destiny was at the gates filled him with joy—a happy fate which would raise him above other men.

He took pleasure in seeing personally to the smallest details of guard duties as if to show Tronk and the soldiers that the appearance of the horse, however strange and worrying, had not disturbed him in the least. This he felt to be very military.

The soldiers, to tell the truth, were not in the least afraid. They treated the horse as a great joke—they would have dearly liked to be able to catch it and take it back to the Fort as a trophy. One of them even asked the sergeant-major's permission, but the latter merely gave a reproving glance as if to say that it was not permissible to joke about service matters.

On the floor beneath, however, where the two cannon were installed, one of the gunners had become very excited at the sight of the horse. He was called Giuseppe Lazzari, a young fellow who had lately joined up. He said the horse was his—he recognised it perfectly, he could not possibly be mistaken. They must have let it escape when the animals went out of the Fort to be watered.

"It's Fiocco, my horse," he kept on shouting as if it really were his own property and someone had robbed him of it.

Tronk who had come up from further down in the redoubt stopped his shouting at once and pointed out sharply that it was impossible for his horse to have run away—to get into the northern valley it would have had to jump the walls of the Fort or cross the mountains.

Lazzari replied that there was a way across—or so he had heard—an easy way across the rocks, an old unused road which no one remembered any more. And in fact this was one of the many legends at the Fort.

But it could only be a complete invention, for of this secret way no trace had ever been found. To right and left of the Fort, for miles and miles, rose savage mountains which had never been crossed. But the soldier would not be convinced and fretted at the idea of having to stay shut up in the redoubt without being able to recapture his horse—half an hour would have been enough to get there and back.

Meanwhile the hours passed, the sun continued its journey towards the west, the sentries relieved each other punctually, the steppe gleamed, more solitary than ever; the pony stood where it had stood before—usually without moving, as

if it were asleep, or wandered about looking for a blade of grass. Drogo's eyes probed into the distance but they could pick out nothing new—nothing but the same shelving rocks, the bushes, the mists in the far north which changed colour slowly as the evening drew on.

Then the new guard came to relieve them. Drogo and his men left the redoubt and moved off across the stony path to return to the Fort through the violet shadows of the evening. When they had reached the walls Drogo gave the password for himself and his men, the door was opened, the old guard drew up in a sort of little courtyard and Tronk began to call the roll. Meanwhile Drogo went off to make a report about the mysterious horse.

As was laid down, Drogo reported to the captain of the day and then they went together in search of the colonel. Generally when anything out of the ordinary happened one had merely to go to the adjutant—but this time it might be serious and there was no time to lose.

Meanwhile the rumour had run like lightning through the Fort. In the furthest off guard room there were already mutterings about whole squadrons of Tartars encamped at the foot of the rocks. The colonel, when he heard of it, merely said: "Somebody should try to catch it; if it is saddled—this horse—perhaps we will be able to find out where it is from."

But there was no point now, for Private Giuseppe Lazzari had succeeded—while the old guard was on its way back to the Fort—in hiding himself behind a boulder without being noticed, then he had climbed down the screes alone, had reached the horse and was now leading it back to the Fort. He had discovered with astonishment that it was not his own, but there was nothing he could do about it now.

It was only when on the point of entering the Fort that some of his comrades noticed that he had disappeared. If Tronk got to know Lazzari would be in the cells for at least a couple of months. They had to save him. So when the sergeant-major called the roll and came to the name 'Lazzari' some replied 'Present' for him.

A few minutes later when the men had already broken ranks they remembered that Lazzari did not know the password. It wasn't a question of prison any longer but of life and death. It would be terrible if he appeared in front of the walls—they would fire on him. Two or three of his friends went off to look for Tronk in an attempt to remedy things.

Too late. Holding the black horse by the bridle Lazzari was already close to the walls. And Tronk was on his rounds, drawn back to the battlements by some vague foreboding. Immediately after he had called the roll he had become worried—why, he could not determine, but he felt that something was not right.

Reviewing the incidents of the day he had traced them as far as the return to the Fort without finding anything suspicious. Then he seemed to stumble on something. Yes, there must have been something wrong at roll call and at the time—as often happens in such cases—he had not noticed it.

There was a sentry on guard directly over the postern gate. In the dusk he saw two figures approaching across the stony path. They would be a couple of hundred yards off. He took no notice, thinking he was seeing things. Very often in lonely places if you stand waiting for a long time you end up even in broad daylight by seeing human forms start from among the bushes and rocks—you feel that someone is watching, you go and look and there is nothing there.

To break the monotony the sentry looked around him, greeted a comrade—he was the sentry thirty yards or so to his right—with a gesture, adjusted his heavy cap, which was tight over his brow, and then looked, to the left and saw Sergeant-Major Tronk standing absolutely still and gazing at him severely.

The sentry shook himself, looked to the front once more, saw that the two shadows were not a dream, indeed they were nearer now, only seventy odd yards away: to be precise they were a soldier and a horse. Then he levelled his gun, cocked it and stiffened in the gesture he had repeated hundreds of times at drill. Then he cried: “Who goes there? Who goes there?”

Lazzari had not been a soldier long—it never occurred to him that without the password he could not get in again. At the most he was frightened he might be punished for going off without permission. But you never knew—perhaps the colonel would pardon him because he had brought in the horse. It was a beautiful animal, a general’s charger.

There were only forty odd yards left. The horse’s shoes rang on the stones. It was almost quite dark. Far off there was the sound of a trumpet. “Who goes there? Who goes there?” repeated the sentry. He would call again then he would have to fire.

A sudden feeling of uneasiness had fallen upon Lazzari at the sentry’s first shout. It seemed so odd to him, now that he was personally involved, to hear himself challenged like that by a comrade, but at the second “Who goes there?” he recognised the voice of a friend, someone from his own company whom among themselves they called Moretto.

“It’s me, Lazzari,” he shouted. “Send the sergeant of the guard to open for me. I’ve caught the horse. And don’t let them see you or they’ll put me inside.”

The sentry did not move. He stood there with his gun at his shoulder trying to delay the third “Who goes there?” Perhaps if Lazzari had noticed the danger himself he would have turned back, could have joined up the next day with the guard from the New Redoubt. But there was Tronk, a few yards away, gazing

sternly at him.

Tronk did not say a word. He looked now at the sentry, now at Lazzari because of whom he would probably be punished. What did his glances mean?

The soldier and the horse were no more than thirty yards away; it would have been silly to wait any longer. The nearer Lazzari came the more easily he would be hit.

“Who goes there? Who goes there?” the sentry cried for the third time and there was in his voice an undertone—a sort of private warning which was against the regulations. He was trying to say: “Turn back while you have time, do you want to get killed?”

At last Lazzari understood. In a flash he remembered the iron laws of the Fort and felt himself lost. But—who knows why?—instead of running away he dropped the horse’s bridle and came on alone crying out in a shrill voice:

“It’s me, Lazzari. Don’t you see me? Moretto, Oh Moretto. It’s me. What are you doing with your gun? Are you mad, Moretto?”

But the sentry was no longer Moretto—he was simply a soldier with a hard face who now was slowly raising his gun to take aim at the enemy. He had laid the gun to his shoulder and with the corner of his eye squinted at the sergeant-major silently praying that he might signal to stop. But Tronk stared at him and did not move.

Without turning round Lazzari drew back a few paces, stumbling on the stones.

“It’s me, Lazzari,” he shouted. “Don’t you see it’s me? Don’t fire, Moretto.”

But the sentry was no longer the Moretto with whom his comrades joked freely, he was only a sentry at the Fort in a dark blue uniform with a black bandolier, absolutely identical with all the other sentries in the darkness—a sentry like all the others who had taken aim and now pressed the trigger. He heard a roaring in his ears and seemed to catch Tronk’s harsh voice: “Good shot,” although Tronk had not drawn breath.

The rifle gave a little flash, a tiny cloud of smoke, even the report at first did not seem much, but then it was multiplied by the echoes, thrown from rampart to rampart and for long hung in the air to die away in a distant muttering like thunder.

Now that his duty was done the sentry lowered his rifle, leant over the parapet and looked down, hoping he had not hit the mark. And in the darkness it seemed indeed that Lazzari had not fallen.

No, Lazzari was still standing and the horse had come up to him. Then in the silence left by the shot his voice was heard—and how desperate it sounded: “Oh, Moretto, you have killed me.”

These were his words and he slouched slowly forward. Tronk with his inscrutable face had not made a move but through the labyrinths of the Fort there spread a hum of war.

XIII

THUS began that memorable wind-swept evening with its swaying lanterns and unwonted trumpet calls, with pacing to and fro in the corridors, with clouds rushing down from the north, clouds which caught on the rocky peaks and there left wisps behind them but had no time to stop, so urgent was their errand.

It had needed only a report, a mere rifle-shot, and the Fort had awakened; For years there had been silence, yet they had always looked to the north to hear the voice of approaching war—too long a silence. Now a gun had been fired, with its regulation charge of powder and its lead ball thirty-two grammes in weight, and the men had looked at each other as if it were the signal.

Admittedly even this evening no one, unless it be one of the soldiers, pronounces the word which is in everyone's mind. The officers prefer not to utter it because in it lies their hope. It is because of the Tartars that they have built the walls of the Fort and there use up great stretches of their lives; it is because of the Tartars that the sentries pace up and down day and night like clockwork. And some of them feed their hope every morning with new faith; others keep it hidden in the bottom of their hearts; others again—believing it lost—are not even conscious of harbouring it. But no one has the courage to speak about it, that would perhaps mean bad luck, above all it would look like confessing one's dearest thoughts and of that soldiers are ashamed.

As yet there is only a dead soldier and a horse come from who knows where. In the guardroom at the northern gate, where the unfortunate incident occurred, there is a great stir and, although it is against the regulations, Tronk is there too and has no peace at the thought of the punishment which awaits him: the responsibility falls on him, it was his duty to stop Lazzari from slipping off; it was his duty to notice at once when they came back that the soldier had not answered the roll call.

And now Major Matti also appears, anxious to make his authority felt and to show his powers. He has a strange and puzzling expression—he almost gives the impression that he is smiling. Evidently he is fully informed of everything and orders Lieutenant Mentana, who is on duty in the redoubt, to recover the corpse of the soldier.

Mentana is a pale-faced officer, the oldest lieutenant in the Fort; if he did not

have a large diamond ring and play good chess no one would notice his existence. It is a great jewel he wears on his ring-finger and there are few who can beat him on the chessboard, but, in the presence of Major Matti he literally shakes and loses his head over such a simple matter as sending a fatigue party for the dead man.

Fortunately Major Matti has caught sight of Sergeant-Major Tronk standing in a corner and calls him.

“Tronk, seeing you have nothing to do, take command of the party.”

He says this with the greatest possible naturalness as if Tronk were any N.C.O. and had no personal connection with the occurrence; because Matti is incapable of administering a direct rebuke he usually ends up by becoming white with rage and cannot find words. He prefers the much more terrible weapon of courts of inquiry with phlegmatic interrogations and written documents which succeed in monstrosly magnifying the slightest shortcomings and almost always lead to notable punishments.

Tronk does not bat an eyelid—“Yes, sir,” he replies and hastens down into the little courtyard immediately behind the postern gate. Shortly afterwards a little procession issues from the Fort by the light of one or two lanterns. Tronk is at their head, then four soldiers with a stretcher, four more armed soldiers as a precaution, and last of all. Major Matti himself wrapped in a faded cloak and trailing his sabre on the stones.

They find Lazzari as he died, his face to the ground and his arms stretched out in front of him. In his fall his slung rifle has caught between two stones and now stands upright with the butt uppermost—a strange sight. As he fell the soldier has cut his hand and before the body could grow cold a little blood has had time to flow and form a stain on a white stone. The mysterious horse has disappeared.

Tronk leans over the dead man as though to take him by the shoulders, but he draws back suddenly as if he had caught himself infringing the regulations. “Lift him up,” he orders the soldiers in a low and angry voice, “but first take away his rifle.”

A soldier stoops to unbuckle the sling and lays down the lantern right beside the dead man. Lazzari has not had time to close his eyelids Completely and through the aperture the flame gleams a little on the white.

Then Major Matti, who has remained completely in the shadow calls: “Tronk.”

“Yes, sir,” answers Tronk coming to attention; the soldiers too stop whatever they are doing.

“What happened? ‘Where did he get away?’” asks the major, drawling the words as if he spoke from a mixture of boredom and curiosity. “Was it at the

fountain? Where those big boulders are?"

"Yes, sir, at the boulders," answers Tronk, and does not add another word.

"And no one saw him escaping?"

"No, sir," says Tronk.

"At the fountain, eh? Was it dark?"

"Yes, sir, fairly dark."

Tronk remains at attention for a few moments, then since Matti remains silent he gives a sign to the soldiers to carry on. One of them tries to undo the rifle-sling but the clasp is stiff and he has difficulty. When he pulls on it the soldier feels the weight of the dead body, a leaden weight out of all proportion to what one would expect.

Having got rid of the rifle, the two soldiers delicately turn the corpse over and put it face up. Now they can see his whole face. The mouth is closed and without expression—only the half-open and motionless eyes, since they do not respond to the light of the lantern, have an air of death.

"In the forehead?" asks Matti's voice, for he has at once noticed a sort of little hollow just above the nose.

"Sir?" says Tronk who does not understand.

"I say he was hit in the forehead?" says Matti, annoyed at having to repeat it.

Tronk raises the lantern and shines it full on Lazzari's face; he too sees the little hollow and instinctively puts out a finger as if to touch it. But suddenly he withdraws it in confusion.

"I think so, sir, right there in the middle of the forehead." (But why doesn't he come and see the dead man for himself if he is so interested? What are all these stupid questions for?)

The soldiers, noticing Tronk's embarrassment, concentrate of their work. Two lift up the corpse by the shoulders, two by the legs. The head, left without support, dangles horribly. The mouth, although it is frozen in death, almost begins to open.

"And who was it that fired?" asks Matti once more, still motionless in the darkness.

But at this moment Tronk is not paying attention to him. Tronk is paying attention only to the dead man. "Hold up his head," he commands with deep-felt anger as if he himself were the dead man. Then he realises that Matti has spoken and springs to attention again.

"I beg you pardon, sir, I was . . ."

"I said," Matti repeats and he measures out the words to show that if he doesn't lose his patience it is only because of the dead man, "I said: 'Who was it that fired?' "

“What is his name, do you know?” Tronk asked the soldiers in a low voice.

“Martelli,” says one of them, “Giovanni Martelli.”

“Martelli,” the major repeats to himself. (The name seems not unfamiliar to him—it must be one of the prizewinners at the shooting match. For it is Matti himself who runs the musketry school and he remembers the best ones by name.) “Is it by any chance the one they call Moretto?”

“Yes, sir,” says Tronk, standing motionless at attention. “I believe they call him Moretto. You know, sir, among themselves.”

He says this almost apologetically—as if to show that Martelli is not in any way responsible, that if they call him Moretto it isn’t his fault and that there is no reason whatever to punish him.

But the major has not the slightest intention of punishing him—it doesn’t even enter his head.

“Ah, Moretto,” he exclaims without concealing a certain satisfaction.

The sergeant-major looks hard at him and understands.

“Of course, of course,” he thinks, “give him a prize, the bastard, because he has done his killing well. A wonderful bull, isn’t it?”

At this moment Tronk hates him.

“Of course, of course, tell him out loud that you are pleased,” he thinks, “if Lazzari is dead you don’t give a damn. Congratulate this Moretto of yours.”

And that is what happens—the major with the greatest calmness expresses his satisfaction aloud.

“Ah yes, he doesn’t miss, Moretto,” he exclaims as if to say—‘He was a sly one, Lazzari, he thought Moretto would miss, he thought he would have him on, Lazzari did. And so he learnt what sort of a shot he was. And what about Tronk? maybe he hoped that Moretto would miss (then everything would have been put right, with a few days’ detention).’ “Of course, of course,” the major repeats once more, completely forgetting that the dead man is in front of him, “a picked shot, Moretto.”

At last, however, he stops and the sergeant-major can turn round and see how they have laid the corpse on the stretcher. It is already laid out decently; they have thrown an army blanket over its face; of the naked flesh only the hands can be seen—two big peasant’s hands which seem still red with life and warm blood.

Tronk nods his head. The soldiers raise the stretcher.

“May we go, sir?” he asks.

“Who is there to wait for?” Matti answers in a hard voice. Now, with genuine amazement, he has felt Tronk’s hatred and means to return it with interest, adding to it his contempt for an inferior.

“Forward,” orders Tronk. Forward march, he should have said, but it seems

almost a profanation. Only now did he look towards the walls of the Fort, towards the sentry on the skyline, vaguely lit by the gleam of the lanterns. Behind these walls in a barrackroom there is Lazzari's bunk, his little box with the things brought from home—a holy image, two heads of maize, a steel for flint, some coloured handkerchiefs, four silver buttons for his best suit which had belonged to his grandfather and would never be of any use at the Fort.

Perhaps the pillow still bears the imprint of his head, exactly as two days before when he awoke. Then there is probably a little bottle of ink—Tronk adds mentally, for even his lonely thinking is meticulous—a little bottle of ink and a pen. All this will be put in a little parcel and sent home with a letter from the colonel. The other things issued by the Government will naturally be handed on to some other soldier, including his spare shirt. But not his fine uniform nor yet his gun; the gun and the uniform will be buried with him because such is the ancient rule of the Fort.

XIV

AND when the first dawn was breaking they saw from the New Redoubt a thin black line on the northern plain. A thin moving line which could not be a hallucination. The first to see it was a sentry called Andronico, then Pietri, then Sergeant Batta who had laughed at it at first, and then Lieutenant Maderna too, the commander of the redoubt.

A small black line was advancing from the north across the uninhabited steppe; it was both astonishing and absurd although even during the night some sort of presentiment had been abroad in the Fort. At about six, Andronico was the first to shout the alarm. Something was approaching from the north, an event such as had not happened in living memory. As the light grew stronger the advancing body of men stood out clearly against the white background of the desert.

A few minutes later the regimental tailor, Prosdocimo, as he had done every morning since time immemorial (once it had been from pure hopefulness, then merely from a sense of duty and now was almost solely from habit)—Prosdocimo, then, climbed up to look out from the roof of the Fort. In the guardrooms they let him pass from old custom; he would look in and chat a little with the sergeant of the guard, then go back down into his subterranean quarters.

This morning he came up onto the sentry-walk and looked at the triangular patch of desert and said to himself: "I must be dead." It seemed impossible that it should be a dream. In a dream there is always an element of absurdity and confusion—one is never altogether free of the vague feeling that everything is false, that sooner or later one is going to wake up. In a dream things are never crystal clear and real, like that desolate plain over which columns of unknown men were advancing.

But it was so extraordinary, so like certain longings of his youth, that it never even entered Prosdocimo's head, that it could be true; so he thought he must be dead.

He thought he must be dead and that God had pardoned him. He thought he was in the other world—a world apparently like our own, except that there the good things of life will come true according to our just desires and once they have been satisfied one's soul is at peace, not as in this world where there is

always something to poison even our happiest days.

He thought he must be dead, Prosdocimo, and did not move thinking that, being dead, it was not his place to move, and that some mysterious power would stir him to action. Instead it was a sergeant-major who respectfully touched his arm.

“What is it?” he said” to him. “Aren’t you feeling well?”

It was only then that Prosdocimo began to understand.

Almost as if in a dream, only better, mysterious men were descending from the Northern Kingdom. Time passed more quickly, one's eyelids no longer even blinked as one gazed at the unusual sight; the sun was already shining on the red rim of the horizon and little by little the foreign troops drew nearer, although with extreme slowness. Some people said that they were on foot and on horse, that they were coming on in Indian file, that there was a flag too. So some people said and others believed they saw it, everybody got it into their heads that they saw foot and horse, the flag, the long file, although in reality they made out only a thin, black, slowly-moving line.

“The Tartars,” Andronico dared to say as if it were a grim joke, and his face had become as white as death. Half an hour later Lieutenant Maderna at the New Redoubt ordered the cannon to fire one round, a warning shot, as was laid down in the event of unknown armed forces being seen to approach.

It was years since a cannon had been heard up there. The walls shook a little. The report spread with a slow rumble; the noise of destruction echoed among the crags. And Lieutenant Maderna's eyes turned to the smooth profile of the Fort watching for signs of excitement. But the noise of the gun caused no surprise, for the strangers were advancing over that very triangle of plain which was visible from the Fort and everyone knew about them already. Even in the remotest turret, where the left-hand bastion came to an end against the rocks, even the sentry standing guard on the underground storeroom where the lanterns and the mason's things were kept, even this sentry, shut up in the gloomy cellar, where he could see nothing, had heard the news. And he was impatient for time to pass so that he too could go up on to the sentry-walk and look.

Everything went on as before—the sentries remained at their posts, pacing up and down in the prescribed space, the clerks went on copying their reports with screeching pens and dipped them in the ink with their usual rhythm; but from the north men were approaching who must be presumed to be enemies. In the stables the soldiers cursed the horses, the cookhouse chimneys smoked calmly, three soldiers were sweeping out the courtyard; but already there was everywhere a marked air of solemnity, a state of extreme suspense in everyone's mind, as if the great hour had come and nothing could now hold it back.

Officers and men drew deep breaths of the morning air so as to feel within themselves youth and life. The gunners began to get ready their guns, joking among themselves as they worked at them, as if they were beasts one had to keep in good condition; yet at the same time they looked at them with a certain apprehension. Perhaps after such a long interval the pieces could no longer fire; perhaps in the past they had not been cleaned with sufficient care; in a sense, it could only be a makeshift for shortly everything would be settled one way or the other. Never before had the orderlies run up the stairs so quickly, never had the uniforms been so tidy, the bayonets so gleaming, the bugle calls so military. So they had not waited in vain; the years had not been wasted; the old Fort would, after all, be of some use.

Now they were waiting for a, special bugle call, the signal for the “general alarm” which the men had never had the good fortune to hear. During their exercises—held outside the Fort in a secluded valley, where the noises would not reach the Fort and give rise to misunderstandings—the trumpeters had of a calm summer’s afternoon tried out the famous call, more from excess of zeal than anything else; certainly no one ever thought it would be used. Now they were sorry they had not practised it enough; it climbed in one long arpeggio to a high, high note and probably they would bring out a sound that was not quite true.

Only the commandant of the Fort could give the order for the signal and it was of him that everyone thought—already the soldiers were waiting for him to come and inspect the walls from end to end, already they saw him advance towards them, smiling proudly, and looking each man keenly in the eye. It must be a great day for him, for had he not spent his whole life waiting for this event?

But Colonel Filimore was in his office and looked out of his window to the north—towards the little triangle of steppe not hidden by the crags; there he saw a line of small black dots moving like ants, moving towards him, and they seemed indeed to be soldiers.

Every now and again an officer came in—Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolosi or the captain of the day or an orderly officer. They came in on various pretexts (they were impatiently awaiting his orders) and announced unimportant items of news: that another supply waggon had arrived from the city, that the repairs to the baker’s shop were beginning that morning, that a dozen soldiers had finished their leave, that the telescope had been set up on the terrace of the Fort if the colonel wished to avail himself of it.

They gave these pieces of news, saluted with a click of their heels, and could not understand why the colonel sat there without saying a word, without giving the commands everyone awaited with certainty. He had not yet reinforced the guards, nor doubled the number of rounds issued to each man nor decided to

give the general alarm.

Almost as if he suffered from some mysterious listlessness he coldly watched them come in, neither cast down nor glad, as if all this did not concern him.

To crown everything it was a splendid October day, with clear sunlight, the air fresh, the very weather one would desire for a battle. The wind shook out the flag on the roof of the Fort, the yellow earth of the court-yard shone and the soldiers as they passed across it left clear-cut shadows. A lovely morning, sir.

But the commandant let it be clearly understood that he preferred to be left alone and when there was no one in the office he went from desk to window, and from window to desk, unable to make up his mind; for no reason at all he set right his grey moustache and gave vent to long sighs; but as is the way with old men these were a purely physical phenomenon.

Now the black streak made by the foreign troops could no longer be seen on the little triangle of plain visible from the window—which meant that they had come closer, had come nearer to the frontier. In three or four hours they would be at the foot of the mountains.

But the colonel went on polishing the lenses of his spectacles with his handkerchief for no reason at all; he turned over the pages of the reports piled on his table; the orders of the day to sign, a request for leave, the daily report of the medical officer, a bill from the saddlery stores.

What are you waiting for, sir? The sun is already high in the sky and even Major Matti, who came in a little while ago, did not hide a certain apprehension—even Major Matti who never believes anything. At least show yourself to the sentries, take a turn round the walls. Captain Forte who has been to inspect the New Redoubt says that the foreigners can now be distinguished separately and are evidently armed—they are carrying rifles; there is no time to lose.

But Filimore wants to wait. All right, they are soldiers, but how many are there of them? One person says two hundred, another two hundred and fifty; they have also pointed out that if this is the advance guard the main guard will be at least two thousand men. But the main guard has not yet been sighted, perhaps it does not even exist.

The main guard has not been seen yet, sir, only because of the mists to the north. These have come very far down this morning, the wind from across the hills has driven them down, and so they cover a great portion of the plain. These two hundred men would not make sense if they did not have a large army behind them; the others will certainly come into sight before midday. In fact there is one sentry who says he saw something moving on the edge of the mists a little while ago.

But the commandant goes up and down from window to desk and back again

and absentmindedly turns the pages of the reports. Why should the foreigners assault the Fort? he wonders. Perhaps they are normal manœuvres to test the difficulties of the desert. The time of the Tartars is passed—they are no more than a remote legend. And who else would be interested in forcing the frontier? There is something unconvincing about all this.

They may not be the Tartars, sir, but they are certainly soldiers. For several years there have been deep-seated quarrels with the Northern Kingdom—that is no mystery to anyone; more than once there has been talk of war. Soldiers they certainly are. There are both horse and foot, probably the artillery will come up soon, too. Without exaggerating, they would have plenty of time to attack before evening—and the walls of the Fort are old, the rifles are old, the cannon are old, everything completely out of date except the hearts of the soldiers. Don't be too sure, sir.

Don't be too sure! He only wishes he were not sure—this is what he has lived for; he has not many years left to him and if this is not the real thing there will probably not be another chance. It is not fear that holds him back, it is not the thought of perhaps dying. It does not even enter his head.

The fact is that now, towards the end of his days, Filimore has suddenly seen Fortune approach in silver armour and with a blood-stained sword; he hardly ever thought of her any more, yet he now saw her approach in this strange guise and her face was friendly. And Filimore—this is the truth—did not dare to go to meet her; he had been deceived too often and now he had had enough.

The others, the officers of the Fort, had gone running out to meet her, to celebrate her arrival. Unlike him they had gone forth confidently and savoured the strong and bitter smell of battle almost as if they had experienced it before. But the colonel waited. Until the fair apparition had touched him on the hand he would not move, as if out of superstition. Perhaps a trifle would make the image dissolve in the void—a simple gesture of greeting, an admission of desire.

So he confined himself to shaking his head negatively as if to say that Fortune must be mistaken. And looked around incredulously, looked behind where there were presumably other people, the people Fortune was really seeking. But there was no one else to be seen—there was no possibility of mistaken identity, he had to admit that this enviable fate was reserved for himself.

There had been a moment at first light when the mysterious black line had appeared to him against the whiteness of the desert, a moment in which his heart had leapt with joy. Then the vision in the silver armour and with the blood-stained sword had grown a little more indistinct—it was moving towards him but did not in fact make any progress, did not succeed in reducing the distance between them, a short distance yet infinite.

The reason is that Filimore has been waiting too long, and at a certain age hope is very exhausting; one does not rediscover the faith one had at twenty. Too long he has waited in vain; his eyes have read too many orders of the day, on too many mornings his eyes have seen that wretched steppe and always it has been deserted. And now that the foreign troops have appeared he has the distinct impression that there must be some mistake (it would be too much of a good thing otherwise)—there must be some terrible mistake somewhere.

Meanwhile the clock on the wall opposite the desk continued to tick life away, and the colonel's thin fingers, withered with the years, persisted in cleaning the lenses of his spectacles with a handkerchief although there was no need to do so.

The hands of the clock were approaching half-past ten when Major Matti came into the room to remind the colonel of his daily officers' conference. Filimore had forgotten and was disagreeably surprised; he would have to talk about the strangers who had appeared on the steppe; he would no longer be able to put off a decision; he would have to state officially that they were enemies—or else make a joke of it, or perhaps take a middle course: give orders for security measures and at the same time take up a sceptical attitude as if there were nothing to get excited about. But some decision had to be taken and that he did not like. He would have preferred to keep on waiting, to remain completely motionless—almost as if he wanted to provoke fate to break loose.

Major Matti said to him with one of his ambiguous smiles:

“This looks like it this time.”

Colonel Filimore did not reply. The major said:

“You can see more of them coming up now. There are three columns, you can see them from here.”

The colonel looked him in the eyes and for a moment almost succeeded in liking him.

“You say more of them are coming up?”

“You can see them from here, sir, there are a good many of them now.”

They went to the window and saw more black lines moving over the triangle of northern steppe—no longer one as at dawn, but three side by side, and the end of them was lost to sight.

War, war, thought the colonel and tried in vain to dismiss the thought as if to wish for it were forbidden. At Matti's words hope had re-awakened in him and it now filled him with excitement.

His mind still in this whirl, the colonel suddenly found himself in the conference room with all the officers (except those on duty) drawn up before him. Above the dark splash of the uniforms individual faces gleamed palely but

he had difficulty in recognising them; fresh or wizened, they all said the same, with feverish, gleaming eyes they avidly asked him to announce formally that the enemy was there. Standing to attention they all stared at him, demanding not to be defrauded.

In the great silence which filled the hall only the deep breathing of the officers was to be heard. The colonel saw that he must say something. At that moment he was filled with an unfamiliar and uncontrolled emotion. To his astonishment (for he could discover no reason for it) Filimore was suddenly certain that the foreigners were indeed enemies determined to violate the frontier. He had no idea how the change had come about for up to the moment before he had successfully resisted the temptation to believe so. He felt himself being swept along by the tension in everyone's breast; he knew that he would speak without reservations. "Gentlemen," he would say, "at last the moment we have awaited for years has come."

That was what he would say, or something like it and the officers would listen with gratitude to what he said, to the tone of authority with which he promised them glory. That was what he was about to say, but yet—in the innermost recesses of his mind—a voice persisted to the contrary. It is impossible, colonel, said this voice, watch out while there is still time, there is some mistake somewhere (it would be too good to be true otherwise), watch out because there is a terrible mistake somewhere.

Every now and again from among the welter of the emotions which invaded him this hostile voice emerged. But it was late; his delay was becoming embarrassing.

So the colonel took a step forward, raising his head as was his custom when he was about to speak and the officers saw his face suddenly grow red—yes, the colonel was blushing like a boy because he was about to confess the jealously guarded secret of his life.

He had blushed delicately like a child and his lips were about to utter the first sound when the hostile voice re-awoke in the depths of his mind and Filimore trembled with suspense. At that moment he seemed to hear a hurried step climbing the stairs, approaching the hall where they were gathered. None of the officers noticed it, for all were intent on their commandant, but after all these years Filimore's ear had become trained to distinguish the slightest sounds in the Fort.

There was no doubt about it, the step was coming nearer with unusual haste. It had a dull sound, a sound from another world, the sound of a routine inspection; it came, it seemed, straight from the world of the plain. The noise now reached the other officers clearly too and they felt their feelings rudely

bruised, but why they could not have said. At last the door opened and an unknown officer of the dragoons appeared, gasping with fatigue and covered with dust.

He drew himself up to attention.

“Lieutenant Fernandez,” he said, “of the 7th Dragoons. I have brought this message from the city, from His Excellency, the Chief of Staff.” Bearing his tall headdress elegantly on his arched left arm he approached the colonel and handed him a sealed envelope.

Filimore shook his hand.

“Thank you,” he said, “you look as if you have had a hard ride of it. Now Santi here will take you to have something to eat and drink.”

Without the least trace of anxiety the colonel made a sign to Lieutenant Santi, the first to catch his eye, and invited him to do the honours of the Fort. The two officers went out and the door closed again.

“Excuse me, won’t you?” Filimore asked with a slight smile and held up the envelope as a sign that he preferred to read it immediately. His hands carefully undid the seals, tore off a strip of paper and took out a double page covered with writing.

As he read the officers stared at him, looking for something to show itself in his face. But there was nothing there. It was as if he had glanced over a newspaper after supper sitting by the fire on a lazy winter evening. Only the flush had disappeared from the commandant’s thin face.

When he had finished reading, the colonel folded the double page, replaced it in the envelope, put the envelope in his pocket and raised his head to show that he was about to speak. One could feel it in the air that something had happened, that the enchantment of a few minutes before had been shattered.

“Gentlemen,” he said, and his voice came with great difficulty, “if I am not mistaken there has this morning been a certain excitement among the men—and also among yourselves—because of formations sighted on the so-called Tartar steppe.”

With difficulty his words pierced the profound silence. A fly buzzed up and down in the hall.

“These are,” he went on, “these are units of the Northern Kingdom which have been given the task of tracing the frontier as we did many years back. They will not come near the Fort in the course of their duties; it is probable that they will spread out in groups and make their way up into the mountains. So I am informed officially in this letter by His Excellency, the Chief of Staff.”

As he spoke, Filimore gave vent to long sighs, sighs not of impatience or sorrow, but (as is the way with old men) a purely physical phenomenon; and

suddenly his voice seemed to have become an old man's voice with certain limp and hollow notes, and his eyes, an old man's eyes, had become yellowish and opaque.

He had felt it all along, Colonel Filimore. They could not be enemies, he knew it perfectly well; he was not born for glory. He had so often allowed himself to be stupidly deluded. Why, he asked himself, why had he allowed himself to be taken in? He had felt from the first that it was bound to end thus.

"As you know," he continued in a tone so apathetic that it could not but sound extremely bitter, "the boundary stones and other demarcation signs were laid by us many years ago. But I am informed by His Excellency that there is one stretch not yet marked off. I shall dispatch a certain number of men under a captain and a subaltern to complete the work. It is a mountainous region with two or three parallel chains. It is not necessary to mention that it would be well to push as far forward as possible and secure the northern ridge. Not that it is strategically essential, if you understand me, because no war could ever develop up there nor could it offer any possibilities of manoeuvre." He broke off for a moment, lost in thought. "Possibilities of manoeuvre—where was I?"

"You were saying that one should push as far forward as possible," prompted Major Matti with a suspiciously penitent air.

"Yes, that's right, I was saying one should push as far forward as possible. However it is not easy—by now we have been outstripped by the Northerners. However—well, we'll talk about that later," he concluded, turning to Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolosi.

He fell silent and seemed to be tired. As he spoke he had seen a veil of disappointment fall over the officers' faces; he had seen them become once more not warriors eager for the fight but colourless garrison officers. But they were young, he thought, they would still have time.

"Now," went on the colonel, "I am sorry to have to make a remark which applies to several of you. I have noticed more than once that at the changing of the guard some platoons parade in the courtyard without their respective officers. These officers evidently consider themselves authorised to come on parade later . . ."

The fly buzzed up and down the hall; the flag on the roof of the Fort had drooped; the colonel was talking about discipline and regulations; in the northern steppes armed formations advanced, no longer enemies eager for battle but harmless soldiers like themselves, advanced not towards destruction but to carry out a survey; their rifles were unloaded, their swords blunt. The inoffensive phantom army spreads over the northern plain and in the Fort everything falls back once more into the rhythm of the accustomed days.

XV

THE expedition to trace the unexplored stretch of frontier left the next day at dawn. In command was Monti, the huge captain, accompanied by Lieutenant Angustina and a sergeant-major. Each of the three had been entrusted with the password for that day and for the four following days. It was highly improbable that all three of them would perish; in any case the most senior surviving soldier would have had powers to open his superior officers' jackets, if they were dead or had fainted, to search in the little inside pocket and take from it the sealed envelope containing the secret pass for re-entering the Fort.

As the sun rose, some forty armed men emerged from the walls of the Fort. Captain Monti wore heavy nailed boots like those of his men. Only Angustina wore jackboots; before they left, the captain had looked at them with extreme curiosity but had said nothing.

They descended a hundred yards or so over the stony road, then struck across to the right towards the mouth of a narrow rocky valley which ran, into the heart of the mountain.

They had been walking for half an hour when the captain said:

"You'll have hard going with these," and pointed to Angustina's jackboots.

Angustina said nothing.

"I don't want to have to stop," the captain went on after a little. "They'll hurt you, you'll see."

"It's too late now," replied Angustina, "you could have told me sooner, if that is the case."

"Either way it would have come to the same thing," retorted Monti. "I know you, Angustina, you would have put them on just the same."

Monti could not stand him. With all the airs you give yourself, he thought, I'll show you soon. And he forced the pace to the utmost even up the steepest slopes, knowing that Angustina was not strong. Meanwhile they had come close to the base of the cliffs. The loose stones had grown smaller and their feet sank into them exhaustingly.

"Usually there is a devilish wind blowing down this gorge," said the captain. "But today it's fine."

Lieutenant Angustina said nothing.

“It’s a good job there’s no sun,” Monti went on. “It’s good going today.”

“Then you have been here already?” asked Angustina.

“Once,” answered Monti, “we had to look for a deserter.”

He broke off the last word because the noise of a stonefall had come from high up on a grey overhanging wall of rock. They could hear the crash of the boulders exploding against the crags and rebounding wildly down into the abyss amidst clouds of dust. A crash of thunder was thrown from cliff to cliff. The mysterious stonefall continued for some minutes in the heart of the crags, but died away in the gullies before reaching the foot; only two or three stones reached the screes where the soldiers were climbing.

All had fallen silent. In the roaring of the stonefall they had felt the presence of a hostile power. Monti looked at Angustina with a vague air of distrust. He hoped he would be afraid, but not at all. However the lieutenant seemed to be excessively heated after the short march and his elegant uniform was somewhat disarrayed.

With all the airs you give yourself, you damned snob, thought Monti, I’ll show you soon. He at once continued the march, forcing the pace even more, and every so often he threw short glances behind to look at Angustina. Yes, it was as he had hoped and foreseen, you could see that the boots were beginning to torture his feet. Not that Angustina slackened pace or put on a pained expression. You could guess it only from the rhythm of his marching, from the expression of determination on his brow.

“I feel I could go on for six hours today,” said the captain. “If only I didn’t have the men. It’s good going today,” he kept on with naive malice. “How are you?”

“I beg your pardon?” said Angustina, “what did you say?”

“Nothing,” and he smiled wickedly, “I was asking how you were getting on.”

“Ah yes, thank you,” said Angustina evasively and then after a pause to hide how he was panting from the climb, “it’s a pity.”

“What’s a pity?” asked Monti, hoping the other would confess to being tired.

“It’s a pity one can’t come up here oftener, it’s a wonderful spot,” and he smiled with his detached air.

Monti quickened the pace still more but Angustina kept at his heels; his face was now pale with effort; trickles of sweat ran down from the rim of his heavy cap and even the stuff of his jacket had become soaked through on his back, but he did not say a word nor lose ground.

By now they were among the crags; terrible grey cliffs rose sharply all around; it seemed the valley must rise to unimaginable heights.

The signs of normal life ceased and gave way to the motionless desolation of

the mountains. Every now and again Angustina raised his eyes in fascination to the crests poised overhead.

“We will have a halt further on,” said Monti, who kept a continual watch on him. “You can’t see the place yet. But are you really not tired? Sometimes a person doesn’t feel up to it. It’s best to say so even if you risk getting there too late.”

“Let’s get on, let’s get on,” was Angustina’s answer almost as if he were the superior officer.

“Of course, you know I was only saying that because anyone can happen not to feel up to it. That was the only reason why I said it.”

Angustina was pale, trickles of sweat ran from the rim of his cap, his jacket was soaked through. But he gritted his teeth and did not give in; he would have died sooner. Trying not to let the captain see it, he was in fact glancing up towards the head of the valley, seeking the end of the hard going.

Meanwhile the sun had risen and lit the highest peaks, but there was not the freshness of the fine autumn mornings. A veil of mist was spreading slowly over the sky, treacherous and even.

Now his boots did begin to hurt damnably; the leather bit into his ankle, and to judge by the pain the skin must be already broken.

Suddenly the screes ceased and the valley opened out on to a narrow shelf lying at the foot of a circle of cliffs; it was covered with stunted growths. On both sides there rose, in a maze of towers and rock-chimneys, cliff walls whose height it was hard to judge.

Somewhat against his will Captain Monti ordered a halt and gave the men time to eat. Angustina sat calmly down on a stone, but he shivered at the wind which froze the sweat on his body. He and the captain shared some bread, a slice of meat, a piece of cheese and a bottle of wine.

Angustina was cold; he watched the captain and the men to see if one of them would unroll his cloak so that he could do the same. But the men seemed not to feel tired and were joking among themselves. The captain was eating hungrily, and enjoying it, between mouthfuls he looked up at the precipitous mountains above them.

“Now I see,” he said. “Now I see where we can get up,” and he pointed to the overhanging cliff which ended on the disputed crest.

“We must go straight up from here. We’re fit for it, aren’t we? What do you say, lieutenant?”

Angustina looked at the cliff face. To reach the frontier crest they would indeed have to go straight up from there unless they wanted to get round it by some break in the rock. But that would take much more time and they must

hurry. The Northerners were at an advantage for they had set out first and on their side the going was much easier. It was necessary to go for the cliff directly in front.

“Up here?” asked Angustina looking at the precipitous crags, and he noted that a hundred yards or so to the left the ascent would have been much easier.

“Straight up from here, of course,” repeated the captain. “What do you say to it?”

“The whole point is to get there before them,” said Angustina.

The captain looked at him with obvious dislike.

“All right,” he said. “Let’s have a quick game.”

He produced a pack of cards from his pocket, spread his cloak over a flat stone, invited Angustina to play and then said:

“These clouds. You keep looking at them in a funny way. But don’t be frightened, they’re not bad weather clouds.” And he laughed for some reason as if he had made a witty joke.

So they began to play. Angustina felt the wind chill him. Whereas the captain had sat down between two sheltering rocks he himself caught the wind full in his back. “This time I shall fall ill,” he thought.

“Listen, this is too much from you,” cried Captain Monti without warning, literally shouting the words. “Letting me have an ace like that, damn it. Where’s your head? You keep looking up there and pay no attention to the cards.”

“No I don’t,” replied Angustina. “I made a mistake!” And he tried to laugh without success.

“Tell the truth,” said Monti triumphantly and with satisfaction. “Tell the truth—these things are hurting you, I could have sworn they would from the time we left.

“What things?”

“These fine boots of yours. They aren’t meant for marches like this, my dear Angustina. Tell the truth—they’re hurting.”

“They are a nuisance,” admitted Angustina with a note of contempt, as if to indicate that it was annoying to discuss them.

The captain laughed contentedly.

“I knew it. It’s a bad idea to wear boots up among the scree!”

“Do you see that I have played a king of spades,” Angustina warned him coldly. “Can you not follow suit?”

“Yes, of course, I made a mistake,” said the captain with unabated joy. “Ah, yes, your boots.”

Truth to tell Lieutenant Angustina’s boots did not hold well on the rocks of

the cliff face. They had no nails and tended to slip, whereas Captain Monti's heavy boots, like the men's, took a solid grip of the footholds. But still Angustina did not fall behind; by making a still greater effort—although he was already tired and suffering from the sweat frozen on his body—he contrived to keep close behind the captain up the broken wall of rock.

The mountain turned out to be less difficult and steep than it had appeared from below. It was broken by chimneys, by drifts and scree-covered ledges; the rock-faces were pitted with innumerable holds which they found with ease. The captain, not being agile by nature, clambered up by brute force in a series of spurts, looking down every now and again in the hope that Angustina might have fallen out. But Angustina held on; with the utmost skill he sought out the broadest, the most secure holds and was almost amazed that he could pull himself up so nimbly although he felt completely finished.

As the abyss opened up beneath them, the last crest seemed to recede behind the defences of a perpendicular face of yellow rock. And evening drew on at increasing speed, although a thick ceiling of grey clouds made it impossible to judge how high the sun still stood. It was beginning to be cold, too. An evil wind rose from the valley and they could hear it sighing among the crevices of the mountain.

Then they heard the sergeant who brought up the rear call from below: "Captain!"

Monti stopped, Angustina stopped and after them each soldier right down the line.

"What is it now?" asked the captain as if he had enough to worry him already.

"They're on the crest already, the Northerners!" shouted the sergeant.

"You're mad. Where do you see them?" replied Monti.

"To the left, on that little saddle, immediately to the left of the bit that looks like a nose."

There they were. Three tiny black figures stood out against the grey sky. and could be seen moving about. It was obvious that they had already occupied the lower portions of the crest and would in all probability reach the peak first.

"God damn it," said the captain with a furious glance below him as if the men had been responsible for the delay. Then he turned to Angustina.

"We must at least occupy the crest—there's no two ways about it—otherwise we're for it with the colonel."

"They would have to stop for a bit then," said Angustina. "They won't take more than an hour from the saddle to the summit. If they don't stop we're bound to reach there after them."

Then the captain said: "Perhaps I had better go on with four men—it's quicker

in a small party. You come on without hurrying, or wait here if you feel tired.”

That’s what he was getting at, the bastard, thought Angustina, he wanted to leave me behind and be the only one to come well out of it.

“As you wish,” he replied. “But I prefer to come up too; if we stay here we’ll freeze to death.”

So the captain with four of the nimblest soldiers set off as an advanced patrol. Angustina took command of the remainder, hoping in vain to be able to keep up with Monti. But he had too many men; if he forced the pace the line stretched out too much, so that those at the end were completely lost to view.

So Angustina saw the captain’s little patrol disappear above him behind grey ledges of rock. For a little he heard the little stonefalls they caused in the gullies and then not even that. Even their voices at last faded in the distance.

But meanwhile the sky was becoming dark. The surrounding crags, the pale rock-faces on the other side of the valley, the far end of the precipice had a bluish tint. Little ravens flew along the high crests screeching, as if calling to each other because of some imminent danger.

“Sir,” said the soldier behind Angustina. “It will rain soon.”

Angustina stopped and looked at him and said nothing. His boots were no longer hurting him, but he was beginning to be extremely tired. Each yard he climbed cost an extreme effort. Fortunately on this stretch the rocks were less steep and more broken than before. Who knew where the captain had got to, thought Angustina, perhaps already to the summit, perhaps he had already planted the little flag and set up the boundary mark, perhaps he was already on the way down.

He looked up and, saw that the crest was not much further off. But he could not think how to find a way up, so steep and smooth was the bastion below it.

At last he came on to a wide pebble-strewn ledge and found himself a few yards from Captain Monti. The latter had climbed on to the shoulders of a soldier and was trying to scramble up a low but sheer cliff, not more than a dozen yards high, but apparently unscaleable. It was evident that Monti had been trying persistently for some minutes without succeeding in finding a way.

He groped about three or four times, seeking a hold, and seemed to find one; they heard him swear and saw him lower himself again on to the shoulders of the soldier who shook all over with the strain. At last he gave it up and with a leap was down on the stony ledge.

Monti, who was gasping from fatigue, looked at Angustina with a hostile air.

“You could have waited down there,” he said. “Certainly we can’t all of us get up this way. It will be something if I can get up myself with a couple of soldiers. It would have been better if you had waited down there. Night is coming on now,

and it is going to be a serious job to get down.”

“It was you who said to do it,” answered Angustina without the least sign of becoming embroiled. “You told me to do as I preferred; either wait there or come behind you.”

“All right,” said the captain. “Now we have to find a way up—there are only these few yards between us and the top.”

“What? The crest is just up there?” asked the lieutenant with such indefinable irony that Monti did not even suspect it.

“It’s less than twelve yards,” said the captain with a curse. “Damn it, I want to see if I can’t manage. Even if...”

He was interrupted by an arrogant cry from overhead. Above the rim of the low cliff there appeared two smiling faces.

“Good evening, gentlemen,” shouted one of them, perhaps an officer. “You’ll see that there’s no way up here—you have to come round by the crest.”

The two faces withdrew and only the confused voices of men consulting together could be heard.

Monti was livid with rage. So there was nothing more to be done. The Northerners had now occupied the peak as well. The captain sat down on a boulder, paying no attention to his men who continued to arrive from below.

At that very moment it began to snow, thick, heavy snow, as if it were midwinter. In a few seconds—it seemed hardly credible—the stones became white and the light suddenly faded. Night had fallen, although up to now no one had thought seriously of it.

Without showing the least alarm, the soldiers unrolled their cloaks and took cover beneath them.

“What are you doing, damn it,” exclaimed the captain. “Roll up your cloaks again at once. You haven’t got it into your heads that you are going to spend the night here, have you? We must go down now.”

“If you will allow me,” said Angustina, “so long as these other people are up on the ridge . . .”

“What? What do you want to say?” asked the captain angrily.

“That, in my view, we can’t turn back so long as the Northerners are on the ridge. They got there first and there’s nothing left for us to do here—but we would look remarkably silly.”

The captain did not reply but walked up and down the broad ledge for a few moments. Then he said: “But soon they will go away, too—with this weather it is even worse on the crest than here.”

“Gentlemen,” called a voice from above as four or five heads appeared over the ridge of the cliff, “don’t stand on your dignity, take these ropes and come up

here—in this dark you won't be able to climb down the cliff."

At the same time two ropes were thrown down from above so that the men from the Fort could use them to scale the low wall.

"Thank you," said Captain Monti with a scornful air. "Thank you for the kind thought, but we can look after ourselves."

"Just as you wish," they shouted once more from the summit. "But in any case we'll leave them here in case you could do with them."

There followed a long silence—only the rustle of the snow could be heard and a soldier coughing. Their range of vision was reduced almost to nothing—they could barely distinguish the rim of the cliff over their heads; from it there now shone the red gleam of a lantern.

One or two of the soldiers from the Fort had put on their cloaks once more and lit lanterns. One was brought to the captain in case he might need it.

"Captain," said Angustina in a tired voice.

"What is it now?"

"What would you say to a game?"

"To the devil with the game," replied Monti who knew perfectly that there was no question of descending on such a night.

Without saying a word Angustina produced the pack of cards from the dispatch-case the captain had entrusted to a soldier. He spread a corner of his own cloak over a stone, set the lantern beside it and began to shuffle the cards.

"Captain," he repeated. "Listen to me even if you don't feel like it."

Then Monti saw what the lieutenant meant—there was nothing else to do with the Northerners there, probably making fun of them. And while the men crept close in to the foot of the cliff, taking advantage of every hollow, or fell to eating with jests and laughter, the two officers began a game of cards in the snow.

"Your trick, your trick," they heard them call jestingly from above.

Neither Monti nor Angustina raised their heads but went on playing. But the captain played with an ill will, slamming the cards down on the cloak in rage. Angustina tried in vain to make light of it.

"Wonderful, two aces one after another. But I'm going to take this one. Tell me the truth, you had forgotten that club." And every now and then he laughed, and his laughter seemed to ring true.

Overhead they heard the voices start up again, then the noise of stones being dislodged; probably they were about to move off.

"Good luck," the same voice as before called down to them. "Have a good game and don't forget the two ropes."

Neither the captain nor Angustina replied. They went on playing without the least sign of a reply; they made a great show of concentration.

The gleam of the lantern disappeared from the crest—evidently the Northerners were going away. In the heavy snow the cards had become soaked and it was only with difficulty that they could mix them.

“That’s enough,” said the captain throwing his down on the cloak. “That’s enough of this farce.”

He withdrew under the rocks and wrapped himself up carefully in his cloak.

“Toni,” he cried, “bring me my knapsack and get me some drinking water.”

“They can still see us,” said Angustina. “They can still see us from the crest.” But when he saw that Monti had had enough he went on himself, pretending that the game continued.

Meanwhile a horrible feeling of chill had penetrated him to the marrow. He felt that probably he would no longer be able to move, nor even to stretch himself out; never that he could remember had he felt so ill. On the crest one could still see the swaying light of the Northerners’ lantern moving further and further away; they could still see him. *(And there at the window of the wonderful palace was a slender figure—he himself, Angustina, as a child, strikingly pale with an elegant velvet dress and a collar of white lace. With a tired gesture he opened the window, leaning forward towards the wavering spirits which clung to the sill, as if he were at home with them and had something to tell them.)*

“My trick, my trick,” he tried to shout once more to let the foreigners hear him, but his voice came hoarse and tired. “That’s the second time, damn it, captain.”

Wrapped up in his cloak Monti slowly chewed at something and gazed at Angustina, and as he gazed his anger lessened.

“That’s enough,” he said, “come into the shelter. The Northerners are gone now.”

“You are a much better player than me,” Angustina kept up his pretence but his voice was failing, “but this evening you have no luck at all. Why do you keep on looking up? Why are you looking at the peak? Are you a little worried?”

Then as the snow swirled down, the last soaked cards dropped from Lieutenant Angustina’s hand, the hand itself fell down lifeless and lay stretched inert on the cloak in the wavering light of the lantern.

His shoulders to a stone, the lieutenant let himself fall slowly back; a strange somnolence was overcoming him. *(And through the night a small procession of other spirits advanced towards the palace bearing a litter through the air.)*

“Lieutenant, come over here and eat something. You have to eat in this cold. You must try even if you aren’t hungry.” That is what the captain called and there was a hint of anxiety in his voice. “Come under here—the snow is stopping.”

So it was; quite suddenly the white swirls had become less thick and heavy, the air clearer; by the light of the lanterns one could already pick out rocks ten or twenty yards away.

And suddenly through a rift in the tempest the lights of the Fort appeared, immeasurably distant. They seemed to be infinite in number like an enchanted castle over which there lay all the gaiety of ancient carnivals. Angustina saw them and a thin smile formed slowly on his frost-swollen lips.

“Lieutenant,” the captain called again, for he was beginning to grasp what was happening. “Lieutenant, throw away those cards and come in here and get some shelter from the wind.”

But Angustina was looking at the lights and in truth did not know what lights they were, whether of the Fort or of the distant city or of his own castle where no one awaited his return.

Perhaps at that moment a sentry, looking through the embrasures of the Fort, had glanced casually up against the mountain and had picked out the lights on the crest; at that distance the unlucky wall-face presented no obstacle at all, it made no difference. And perhaps it was Drogo himself who was guard commander. Drogo, who had he wished could also have set out with Captain Monti and Angustina. But to Drogo it had seemed stupid; now that the threat of the Tartars had been dispelled, it had seemed merely a boring duty; there was nothing to be got out of it. But now, Drogo, too, saw the light of the lanterns tremble on the peak and began to regret that he had not gone. So it wasn't only in war that one might find something worthwhile doing; and now he wished he too were up there in the heart of the night and the tempest. Too late—the opportunity had passed him by and he had let it go.

Dry and well rested, wrapped in his warm cloak, Giovanni Drogo perhaps looked enviously at the distant lights while Angustina, all encrusted with snow, laboriously put out his last strength to smooth his wet moustache and drape his cloak with care—not so as to pull it tight about him and be warmer, but for his own secret ends. From his shelter Captain Monti gazed at him in astonishment and wondered what Angustina was doing and where he had seen something that looked like him; but he could not remember.

There was in a room in the Fort an old picture of the death of Prince Sebastian. Mortally wounded, Prince Sebastian lay in the heart of the forest with his back to the trunk of a tree, his head a little to one side, his cloak falling in harmonious folds; there was in the picture none of the disagreeable physical cruelty of death and as one looked at it one was not surprised that the painter had contrived to preserve all the prince's nobility, his extreme elegance.

And now Angustina—not that he thought of it of course—was beginning to

look like Prince Sebastian lying wounded in the heart of the forest. Angustina did not have his gleaming breast-plate nor did a blood-stained helmet lie at his feet nor a broken sword; he was not leaning his back on a trunk but on a hard rock; it was not the last ray of the sun which lit his forehead but merely a weak lantern. And yet the resemblance was great, the position of the limbs the same, the same the way the mantle fell, the same his expression of utter weariness.

Then, although they were much more vigorous and robust compared to Angustina, the captain, the sergeant and all the men seemed one and all rude oafs. And strange as it may seem there awoke in Monti's heart amazement and envy.

When the snow stopped, the wind lamented among the rocks, whirled the powdered ice and shook the flames within the glass of the lanterns. Angustina appeared not to hear it; he sat there motionless, leaning on the boulder, his eyes gazing at the distant lights of the Fort.

"Lieutenant," Captain Monti tried again, "Lieutenant, make up your mind. Come under here. If you stay there you won't be able to stand it. You'll end by freezing to death. Come under here—Toni has built a sort of wall."

"Thank you, captain," said Angustina with an effort, and finding it too difficult to speak he raised one hand a little, making a sign as if to say it did not matter, that these were foolish trifles, matters of no importance. *(At last the chief of the spirits made an imperious gesture to him and Angustina, with his bored air, stepped over the window sill and gracefully took his seat in the litter. The fairy carriage moved gently off.)*

For some minutes there was nothing to be heard but the hoarse cry of the wind. Even the soldiers, gathered in clumps under the rocks to keep warm, had lost all desire to joke and fought silently against the cold.

When the wind fell off for a moment, Angustina again raised his head a little and moved his lips slowly as if to speak; there emerged only these three words: "Tomorrow we should . . ." Then nothing more. Only three words and these so weak that not even Captain Monti noticed that he had spoken.

Three words and Angustina's head fell forward, for there was no longer anything to support it. One of his hands lay white and stiff in the fold of his cloak, his mouth managed to close. Once more a thin smile began to form on his lips. (As the litter bore him of he took his eyes of his friend and turned his head to the front, in the direction of the procession, with a sort of curiosity which was at once amused and distrustful. Thus he went off into the night with almost inhuman nobility. The procession wound slowly through the sky, rising higher and higher, then it became a confused streak, then a little wisp of mist, then nothing.)

What were you trying to say, Angustina? What should we do tomorrow? Captain Monti had at last left his shelter and shook the lieutenant roughly by the shoulder to bring him to life; but the pity is he succeeds only in disarranging the noble folds of his soldier's shroud. As yet none of the men has noticed what has happened.

Monti swears and the only answer is the voice of the wind from the black precipice. What were you trying to say, Angustina? You went off without finishing the sentence—perhaps it was something quite trite and stupid, perhaps an absurd hope, perhaps nothing at all.

XVI

WHEN they had buried Lieutenant Angustina, time began to flow over the Fort again just as before.

“How long have you been here now?” Major Ortiz asked Drogo.

Drogo said: “I have been here four years.”

The winter had come unexpectedly, a long winter. Snow would fall, at first a couple of inches, then after a pause a deeper layer and then another, so often that it seemed impossible to keep count of them; it would be a long time before the spring came again. (And yet one day—much sooner than they expected, much sooner—they will hear streams of water gushing from the edge of the terraces and winter will inexplicably be over.)

Lieutenant Angustina’s coffin, wrapped in a flag, lay underground in a little compound to one side of the Fort. Over it there was a cross of white stone with his name on it. Further over there was a smaller cross in wood for Private Lazzari.

“Sometimes I think,” said Ortiz, “we want a war, we keep waiting for some great chance, we curse our luck because nothing ever happens. And yet there’s Angustina . . .”

“You mean,” said Giovanni Drogo, “you mean that Angustina did not need luck? That he was a good soldier without it?”

“He was not strong—I think he may even have been ill,” said Major Ortiz. “He was worse off than any of us, really. Like us he did not come face to face with the enemy, he didn’t have a war either. Yet he died as if it were in battle. Do you know how he died?”

“Yes,” said Drogo, “I was there too when Monti told how it happened.”

The winter had come and the foreign troops had departed. Hope’s bright standards with their gleam that might be the gleam of blood had slowly drooped and once more there was calm in men’s hearts; but the sky was left empty and in vain their eyes still sought something on the far edge of the horizon.

“He knew the right moment to die, that’s a fact,” said Major Ortiz. “just as if a bullet had got him. A hero, that’s what he was. Yet no one fired at him. Of all those who were with him that day everyone had the same chance—he didn’t have any advantage, unless that it was that he died more easily. But after all,

what did the others do? For the others it was a day more or less like the rest.”

“Yes,” said Drogo, “only a bit colder.”

“Yes, a bit colder,” said Ortiz. “But you could have gone with them too—you had only to ask.”

They were sitting on a wooden bench on the uppermost terrace of the fourth redoubt. Ortiz had come in search of Lieutenant Drogo, who was on duty. From day to day a firm friendship was growing between them.

They were sitting on a bench wrapped in their cloaks, their gaze automatically turned to the north where great shapeless clouds, heavy with snow, were accumulating. From time to time the north wind blew and chilled their clothing. The high rocky peaks to right and left of the gap had turned black. Drogo said: “I think it will snow here at the Fort tomorrow, too.”

“Probably,” answered the major without any real interest and fell silent.

“It will snow,” Drogo went on. “The ravens are still flying past.”

“It’s our own fault,” said Ortiz who was pursuing an obstinate line of thought. “After all we always get our deserts. Angustina, for instance, was ready to pay a high price—we weren’t. Perhaps that is the whole point. Perhaps we expect too much. After all we get our deserts.”

“Well,” asked Drogo, “well, what should we do?”

“Oh, I wouldn’t do anything,” said Ortiz with a smile. “I have waited too long now, but you . . .”

“What about me?”

“Go away while there is still time, go back down to the city, get used to garrison life. After all you don’t seem to me the type to despise the pleasures of life. You’ll have a better career there than here, that I’m sure of. And then we aren’t born to be heroes.”

Drogo said nothing.

“You’ve let four years go past already,” said Ortiz, “you have got a certain start in seniority—let’s admit it—but think how much good it would have done you to be stationed in the city. You have been cut off from the world, no one will remember you anymore. Go back while there is still time.”

Giovanni listened in silence with his eyes fixed on the ground.

“I’ve seen others before you,” the major went on. “Little by little they got accustomed to the Fort, remained imprisoned in here and could no longer make a move. Old at thirty, that was what they were.”

“I believe you, sir,” said Drogo, “but at my age . . .”

“You are young,” Ortiz went on, “and will still be young for a bit. That’s true. But I wouldn’t count too much on that. It only needs another two years to pass—only two years—and it would be too much of an effort for you to go back.”

“Thank you,” said Drogo, who was not in the least impressed. “But after all here at the Fort one can always hope for better things. It may be absurd, but even you—if you are frank—will confess . . .”

“Maybe so,” said the major, “all of us, more or less, persist in hoping. But it is absurd. You’ve only got to think a little,” (and he pointed to the north). “It will never again be possible for a war to come from there. And now—after what has just happened—who do you expect to take it seriously?”

As he spoke he had risen to his feet, always looking to the north just as he had done on that distant morning when they were on the edge of the plateau, and Drogo had seen him stare as if spellbound at the enigmatic walls of the Fort. Four years had passed since then, a fair slice of life, and nothing, absolutely nothing, had happened to justify such high hopes. The days had gone by one after another; soldiers, who might have been the enemy, had appeared one morning on the rim of the northern plain, then they had withdrawn after some harmless frontier duties. Peace reigned over the world, the sentries sounded no alarm, nothing gave any grounds for thinking that life might change. As in past years winter came on with the usual routine and the wind from the hills blowing against the bayonets produced a weak whistling sound. And there he was still, Major Ortiz, standing on the terrace of the fourth redoubt, not even believing his own words of wisdom, looking once more at the northern steppe as if he alone had the right to look at it, he alone the right to remain there whatever might come of it, and Drogo, on the other hand was a good fellow, but out of place, someone who had miscalculated and would have done well to go back where he came from.

XVII

At last the snow on the terraces turned soft and one's feet sank into the slush. The sweet sound of the streams came unexpectedly from the nearest mountains; here and there on the sides of the peaks one could see white vertical stripes sparkling in the sun, and now and again the soldiers caught themselves singing as they had not done for months.

The sun no longer raced away as it had before in its haste to set, but began to linger a little in the midst of the sky, eating away the heaped snow, and it was in vain that the clouds continued to rush down from the northern ice-fields; they could no longer make snow—rain was all they could manage and the rain merely melted what little snow remained. The good weather had returned.

Already in the mornings one could hear the voices of the birds which everyone thought to have forgotten. On the other hand the ravens no longer sat gathered on the plateau before the Fort waiting for kitchen scraps but scattered through the valleys in search of fresh food.

At night in the barrack rooms the beams where the packs hang, the rifle-racks, the very doors, even the fine heavy walnut furniture in the colonel's room, all the timber in the Fort, including the oldest bits, creaked in the darkness. Sometimes there were sharp cracks like pistol shots. It seemed as if something were actually flying apart. A man would wake in his bunk and strain his ears. But he could hear nothing except other creakings whispering in the night.

This is the time when an obstinate lament from life re-awakens in the old beams. Many, many years ago in happier times there had been a surge of heat and youthful strength and clusters of buds sprang from the boughs. Then the tree had been cut down. And now it is spring and in each of its dismembered parts there still awakens a pulse of life, an infinitely weaker pulse. Once there were leaves and flowers; now only a dim memory, enough to make a cracking noise and then it is over until the next year.

This is the time when the men in the Fort begin to have strange, quite unsoldierly thoughts. The walls are no longer a hospitable shelter but feel like a prison. Their bareness, the black streaks of the gutters, the oblique angles of the bastions, their yellow colouring, have nothing in common with their new feelings.

One spring morning an officer—from the back one cannot tell who it is and it might even be Giovanni Drogo—an officer is walking in boredom through the great room where the men wash; at this hour it is deserted. He has no inspection to make, nothing to check; he is wandering about to have an excuse for not standing still. Besides, everything is in order, the basins clean, the floor swept and the running tap is not the troops' fault. The officer stops and looks up at one of the windows. The panes are shut—probably they have not been washed for years—and spiders' webs hang in the corners. There is nothing there to comfort the human heart. And yet, through the glass, it is possible to catch a glimpse of something which resembles the sky. The same sky, the officer perhaps thinks, the same sun, is shining at this moment on the squalid wash-place and certain distant meadows.

The meadows are green and not long since little flowers—they will be white—were born there. And the trees, too, as is right and proper, have put on new leaves. It would be fine to ride aimlessly through the countryside. And suppose on a narrow way a pretty girl came to meet him through the hedgerows and as he passed by her on horseback he were to give her a smile. But what foolishness—an officer at Fort Bastiani is never allowed such stupid thoughts.

However strange it may seem, one can even see a white, pleasingly shaped cloud through the glass. The same sort of cloud is sailing over the distant city at this very moment. Now and again people look at it as they stroll along, happy that winter is over; almost all of them are wearing new clothes or refurbished ones, and the young women wear flowered hats and coloured dresses. They all look happy, as if at any moment they expected something pleasant to happen. At least, once upon a time, it was like that—who knows whether things have changed since. And if at a window there were a pretty girl and as he passed beneath it he were to salute her, for no particular reason, would she greet him like a friend with a pleasant smile? But all this is nonsense, a schoolboy's folly.

To one side through the dirty glass one can catch sight of a stretch of wall. It too is flooded with sunlight but the effect it produces is not one of happiness. It is the wall of a barracks and the wall is indifferent to whether the sun shines or the moon—all that matters is that nothing should arise to upset the smooth round of duties. A barrack wall and that is that. And yet one day in a distant month of September the officer had stopped to gaze at it as if fascinated—then these walls had seemed to hold for him a stern but enviable fate. Although he could not find them beautiful, he had remained motionless for some minutes as if he found himself confronted with a miracle.

An officer wanders through the empty wash-place—others are on duty in the various redoubts, others are riding on the stony parade ground, others are sitting

in the office. None of them understands properly what has happened, but their faces get on his nerves. Always the same faces, he thinks instinctively, always the same talk, the same duties, the same documents. And meanwhile there is within him a ferment of tender longings—it is difficult to say precisely what he does want, certainly not these walls, those soldiers, those trumpet calls.

So run, horse, run down the road to the plain, run before it is too late. Don't stop even if you are tired before you see the green meadows, the familiar trees, people's houses, the churches and the belfries.

And then farewell to the Fort—it would be dangerous to stay longer. Your simple mystery is gone. The northern steppe will always remain deserted, never again will the enemy come, never again will anyone come to assault your contemptible walls. Farewell, Major Ortiz, melancholy friend, who cannot break away from the Fort on the hilltops—and so many more like you; you have kept on hoping too long, time has been too quick for you and you cannot start over again. But Giovanni Drogo can. There is nothing more to keep him at the Fort. Now he is going back to the plain, he is going to rejoin human society—very likely they will give him some special duties, a mission abroad, say, with some general. Of course in those years when he has been in the Fort lots of wonderful opportunities have been lost, but Giovanni is still young, he has all the time in the world to make up for it.

So farewell, Fort, with your absurd redoubts, your patient soldiers, your colonel who every morning secretly scans the northern steppe through the telescope. But it is no use, there is nothing there. A salute to Angustina's tomb—perhaps he was the luckiest of all. His, at least, was a true soldier's death—better at all events than the death in the hospital bed which we are likely to have. A salute to his own room, after all Drogo has slept the sleep of the just here for some hundreds of nights. Another salute to the courtyard where this evening too, the new guard will be drawn up with the usual formalities. A last salute to the northern steppe which harbours no more illusions.

Don't think about it anymore, Giovanni Drogo, don't turn back now that you have reached the edge of the plateau and the road is about to plunge into the valley. It would be a piece of stupid weakness. You know it stone by stone, one might say, Fort Bastiani, there is not the slightest risk of forgetting it. The horse trots cheerfully, the day is fine, the air warm and mild, there is a long life before you—almost enough to begin over again from the beginning. What need should there be of a last glance at the walls, at the casemates, at the sentries on duty on the parapet of the redoubts? So a page is slowly turned, falls over to join the others, the ones already finished. It is still only a thin layer. Those still to be read are inexhaustible in comparison, But it is always another page finished, a portion

of your life.

In fact Drogo does not turn. and look back from the edge of the plateau. Without a hint of hesitation he gives spur to his horse, on down the hill. He does not show the least sign of turning his head even the fraction of an inch, he whistles a tune with a fair attempt at coolness. But it is not easy.

XVIII

THE door of the house was open and Drogo at once smelt the same smell of home as in his childhood when he came back to the city after the summer months in the country. It was a familiar and friendly smell and yet after so long a time there was about it a faint suggestion of meaner things. Thus it did recall past years, the sweet pleasures of certain Sundays, happy meals, his lost childhood, but it also spoke of closed windows, of school tasks, of morning chores, of illnesses, of quarrels and of mice.

“Oh, sir,” cried the good Giovanna exultantly as she opened the door to him. And at once his mother came—thank God she had not changed yet.

As he sat in the drawing room and tried to answer all their questions he felt his happiness change against his will to sadness. The house seemed empty compared to once upon a time. Of his brothers one was abroad, another on his travels somewhere and the third in the country. Only his mother remained and after a little she, too, had to go out, to attend a service in church where a friend waited for her.

His bedroom was the same as before, just as he had left it; not a book had been moved, yet it did not seem to be his. He sat in the easy chair and listened to the noise of the carts in the street and the intermittent sound of voices from the kitchen. He sat alone in his room, his mother was praying in church, his brothers were far away—so all the world went on living without need of Giovanni Drogo. He opened a window, saw the grey houses, roof above roof, the hazy sky. He looked for his old school notebooks in a drawer, a diary he had kept for years, some letters. He was amazed that he had written them—he had no recollection of them, everything referred to strange forgotten incidents. He sat down at the piano and tried a chord; then he lowered the cover of the keyboard. And now? he asked himself.

A stranger, he wandered through the city seeking old friends; he heard that they were deep in affairs, in great enterprises, in their political careers. They talked to him of serious and important matters, of factories, railroads and hospitals. One invited him to dinner, another had got married, all had gone their own ways and in four years they had already travelled far apart, however much he tried—but perhaps even he was no longer able to do it—he could not revive

the conversations of another time, its jokes and expressions. He wandered through the city seeking old friends, and he had had many of them, but he ended by finding himself alone on the pavement with hour after empty hour before he could make the evening come.

At night he stayed out late, determined to find amusement. Each time he went out with the usual vague youthful hopes of love and each time he returned disappointed. Once more he began to hate the road—the unchanging, deserted road which brought him home alone.

About this time there was a great ball and Drogo, as he entered the mansion in company with his friend Vescovi, the only friend he had found, felt himself in the best of spirits. Although it was already spring the night would be long, an almost unlimited stretch, of time; before the dawn so much might happen, what precisely Drogo could not say, but certainly several hours of undiluted pleasure. And in fact he had begun to joke with a girl in a violet dress and still midnight had not sounded, when the host summoned him to show him each detail of the house; he led him through labyrinths and subterranean passages, he held him prisoner in the library, he made him examine a collection of weapons piece by piece, spoke to him of questions of strategy, of military affairs, told stories about the Royal House—and meanwhile time passed, the clocks had begun to race alarmingly. When Drogo contrived to free himself, longing to return to the dance, the rooms were already half empty, the girl in the violet dress had disappeared; probably she had already gone home.

In vain Drogo tried drinking, in vain he laughed senselessly—not even wine could help him now. And the music of the violins became thinner; the time came when they were literally playing in a void, for no one was dancing any more. Drogo found himself among the trees of the garden with a bitter taste in his mouth; he could hear the uncertain echoes of a waltz and meanwhile the magic of the ball faded and the sky slowly paled with the approaching dawn.

As the stars set, Drogo stayed on among the dark leafy shadows to watch the day break while one by one the gilded carriages drove away. Now even the players were silent and a servant went through the rooms, lowering the lights. From a tree right over Drogo's head there came the fresh sharp, trill of a bird. The sky became paler and paler; everything slept silently in confident expectation of a fine day. By now, thought Drogo, the first rays of the sun had already reached the bastions of the Fort and the chilled sentries. His ear waited in vain for the sound of a trumpet.

He walked through the sleeping city, it was still deep in slumber, and opened the house door with unnecessary noise. Within, a little light was already filtering through the cracks in the shutters.

“Good night, mother,” he said as he passed along the corridor and it seemed to him that, as in the old days when he came home late, a confused sound answered him from her bedroom—a voice heavy with sleep, but a loving one. And he went on towards his own room feeling almost soothed, when suddenly he noticed that she too was speaking. “What’s wrong, mother?” he asked in the vast silence. At the same moment he realised that he had mistaken the rumbling of a distant carriage for her dear voice. In fact his mother had not replied—her son’s footsteps in the night could no longer awake her as once they had done; it was as if they no longer concerned her, having changed with the passing of time.

Once his steps had reached her in her sleep like a signal agreed between the two of them. None of the other noises of the night, even if they were much louder, could wake her, neither the carts in the street below nor the crying of a child, nor the howling of the dogs, nor the owls, nor a banging shutter, nor the wind in the gutters, nor the rain nor the creaking of the furniture. Only his step awoke her—not that it was loud, for Giovanni went on tiptoe. There was no special reason for it, except that he was her son.

But now it seemed he was her son no more. He had greeted her as before with the same inflection in his voice, certain that at the familiar sound of his step she would have awakened. Instead there had been no reply except the rumbling of a distant carriage. It is very silly, he thought, a ridiculous coincidence, the sort of thing that could easily happen. And yet while he got ready for bed, it left him with a bitter feeling, as if the affection they once had for each other had faded, as if time and distance had slowly spread a veil between them.

XIX

LATER he went to visit Maria, Francesco Vescovi's sister. Their house had a garden and since it was spring the trees bore new leaves and birds sang in the branches.

Maria met him at the door with a smile. She had known that he was coming and had put on a blue dress with a narrow waist like one which had pleased him long ago.

Drogo had thought that he would have felt deep emotion, that his heart would have beaten faster. But when he was beside her and saw her smile again, when he heard her voice saying: "At last, Giovanni" (so different from what he had imagined) he realised how much time had passed.

He was, or so he thought, the same as before, perhaps a little broader in the shoulders and browned by the sun at the Fort. And she had not changed either. But something had come between them.

They went into the great drawing room because the sun was too bright outside; the room was full of soft shadows, a streak of sunlight gleamed on the carpet and somewhere a clock ticked.

They sat on a divan—sat sideways to be able to look at each other. Drogo looked into her eyes without finding anything to say, but she looked vivaciously around—a glance at him, at the furniture, at her turquoise bracelet which was apparently a quite new one.

"Francesco will be here shortly," said Maria cheerfully. "You can keep me company for a little—you must have lots of things to tell me."

"Oh," said Drogo, "nothing special really. It's always . . ."

"But why are you looking at me like that?" she asked. "Do you find me so changed?"

No, Drogo did not find her changed—indeed it was surprising that in four years a girl should not have altered visibly in any way. And yet he had a vague feeling of disappointment and coldness. He no longer succeeded in striking the old note of the days when they had talked like brother and sister and could have fun together without hurting each other. Why did she sit on the sofa so calmly and talk so charmingly? He should have caught her by the arm and said: "Are you mad? What are you getting at—pretending to be serious?" The chill spell

would have been broken.

But Drogo did not feel capable of it. He had before him a new and different person whose thoughts he did not know. He himself perhaps was no longer the same person as before, and he had started by striking a false note.

“Changed?” answered Drogo. “No, no, not at all.”

“Ah, you’re saying that because I’m not as pretty as I was, that’s it. Tell the truth.”

Was it really Maria speaking? Wasn’t she joking? Giovanni listened to her, scarcely believing his ears, hoping from one moment to another that she would cast off her elegant smile, her smooth manner and would laugh out loud instead.

“Ugly, of course I think you’re ugly,” Giovanni would have replied in the old days, putting an arm round her waist and she would have leant against it. But now? It would have been absurd, a joke in bad taste.

“Of course not,” Drogo replied. “You’re quite unchanged, I assure you.”

She looked at him with an unconvinced smile and changed the subject. “And now tell me, have you come back for good?”

It was a question he had foreseen. (“That depends on you,” he had decided to reply—or something like that.) But he had expected it sooner, at the moment of meeting, as would have been natural if it meant anything to her. Now instead it had almost taken him by surprise and was so different, almost a conventional question with no sentimental undertones.

There was a moment of silence; the room lay in the half-light, from the garden came the bird song and from a distant room chords on a piano, the slow, mechanical chords of someone practising.

“I don’t know, I don’t know yet. I am only on leave,” said Drogo.

“Leave—is that all?” said Maria suddenly, and there was in her voice a slight quiver which might have been due to chance or disappointment or even to real pain. But something had indeed come between them, an obscure indefinable veil which would not dissolve. Perhaps it had risen slowly day by day during the long separation, dividing them from each other and neither of them knew it.

“Two months. Then perhaps I shall have to go back, or to another posting, perhaps here in the city,” Drogo explained. The conversation was becoming painful to him. A feeling of indifference had entered his heart.

Both were silent. The afternoon hung heavily over the city, the birds had become mute, only the distant chords of the piano were to be heard, sad and painstaking, rising and rising and rising, filling the whole house, and in the sound there was a sort of obstinate effort as if they were trying to say something very difficult which cannot be said at all.

“It is the Micheli’s daughter, on the floor above,” said Maria, noticing that

Giovanni was listening.

“You used to play that piece too, didn’t you?”

Maria bent her head gracefully as if she were listening.

“No, no, that is too difficult, you must have heard it elsewhere.”

“I thought,” said Drogo.

The piano played on with the same effort. Giovanni watched the strip of sunlight on the carpet and thought of the Fort, imagining the melting snow, the dripping of water on the terraces, the poor mountain spring which knows only tiny flowers on the grassy hillsides and the windborne perfume of pastures.

“But now you will ask for a transfer, won’t you?” the girl went on. “You will have a right to it, surely, after all that time. It must be terribly boring up there.”

She spoke the last words with a suggestion of anger as if she hated the Fort.

“Perhaps a bit, certainly I prefer to stay here with you.”

This poor sentence shot through Drogo’s mind—it seemed a chance to show some courage. It was trite but it might do. But suddenly he lost all desire to say it and thought with disgust how ridiculous the words would have been coming from him.

“Ah, yes,” he went on, “but the days go past so quickly.”

He could hear the sound of the piano but could not tell why the chords rose higher and higher without ceasing. Severe and bare, they retold with resigned detachment an old story—one of his favourites. They spoke of a misty evening under the lamps of the city and of how the two of them walked under the bare trees along the deserted avenue, suddenly happy, holding hands like children, without knowing why. That evening too, he remembered, there had been pianos playing in the houses and the notes had floated from the lighted windows. And although they were probably boring exercises, Giovanni and Maria had never heard such sweet, such human music.

“Of course,” Drogo added jokingly, “there aren’t many amusements up there, but one had got used to it a little.”

There was a scent of flowers in the drawing-room and their conversation seemed to be slowly acquiring a tone of poetic melancholy conducive to declarations of love. Who knows, thought Giovanni, perhaps this first meeting after so long a separation could not be otherwise—with time we might come together again. I have two months’ time. You can’t tell right away like this, perhaps she still loves me and I won’t go back to the Fort. But the girl said:

“What a pity. In three days I am leaving with mamma and Giorgina—we will be away some months, I think.” She became gay and lively at the thought. “We are going to Holland.”

“To Holland?”

Now the girl was all excitement as she talked of her journey—of the friends she would travel with, of the gay times during carnival, of her life, of her companions, as if Drogo were not there. Now she felt entirely at her ease and seemed more beautiful.

“A wonderful idea,” said Drogo who felt bitterness grip his throat like a noose. “This is the best time of the year for Holland, they tell me. They say there are plains all covered with tulips.”

“Oh, yes,” agreed Maria, “it must be lovely.”

“They don’t grow grain, they grow roses,” Giovanni went on with a slight quiver in his voice, “millions and millions of roses as far as the eye can see and above them you see the windmills, all freshly and gaily painted.”

“Freshly painted?” asked Maria, who was beginning to see the joke. “What do you mean?”

“So they say,” Giovanni replied. “And I have read it somewhere too.”

The strip of sunlight had travelled over the whole carpet and was now climbing slowly over an inlaid writing desk. The afternoon was already dying, the sound of the piano had faded, outside in the garden a solitary bird struck up its song again. Drogo gazed at the andirons on the hearth; they were absolutely identical with a pair at the Fort. The coincidence consoled him subtly as if it showed that after all Fort and city belonged to the same world, with the same ways of life. But apart from the andirons Drogo had not managed to find anything else they had in common.

“Yes, it must be lovely,” said Maria lowering her eyes. “But now that I am on the point of leaving I don’t want to anymore.”

“That’s silly, it always happens at the last moment—it’s so tiresome packing,” said Drogo purposely, as if he had not understood her, undertone of feeling.

It needed a word, a simple phrase to tell her that he was sorry she was leaving. But Drogo did not want to ask for anything—at that moment he was really not capable of it, he would have felt he was lying. So he said nothing and gave a vague smile.

“Shall we go into the garden for a minute?” the girl proposed at last, not knowing what to say. “The sun must be lower.”

They rose from the divan. She was silent, expecting Drogo to say something; perhaps she was looking at him with a last vestige of love. But at the sight of the garden Giovanni’s thoughts took flight to the bare grassy slopes around the Fort—up there, too, the prime of the year was at hand; hardy plants were springing up among the rocks. Perhaps at this very time of year, centuries ago, the Tartars had come.

“It is very warm for April,” said Drogo. “It will turn to rain, you’ll see.”

That was what he said and Maria gave a little desolate smile.

“Yes, it is too warm,” she answered with a flat voice, and both were aware that it was all over. Now they were far apart again, a gap was opening between them; in vain they stretched out their hands to touch each other. With each minute the distance between them grew greater.

Drogo knew that he still loved Maria and her world but he had no roots there any more, a world of strangers where his place had been easily filled. He looked at it from without now, looked at it with regret; to go back would have been awkward—new faces, different habits, new jokes, new expressions, to which he was unaccustomed. It was no longer his life, he had taken another path. It would have been stupid and pointless to turn back.

Since Francesco did not come, Drogo and Maria said goodbye with exaggerated cordiality, shutting within themselves their secret thoughts. Maria grasped his hand tightly and looked into his eyes—perhaps she was asking him not to leave like this, to pardon her, to attempt to find once more something they had lost.

And he looked at her too and said: “Goodbye, I hope we shall see each other before you leave.” Then he walked off without turning back, walked towards the gate with a military step, and the gravel of the pathway crunched in the silence.

XX

GENERALLY four years at the Fort sufficed to give one the right to a new posting, but nevertheless Drogo, who wanted to avoid some remote garrison and to stay in his own city, sought a personal interview with the divisional commander. In fact it had been his mother who insisted on the interview—she said that if you didn't want to be forgotten about you had to push yourself. If he didn't do anything no one was going to look after his interests of their own accord. And so he would probably get another dreary frontier posting. And it was his mother who, through friends, pulled wires so that the general would receive her son in a favourable frame of mind.

The general was sitting in an immense study behind a large table smoking a cigar. There was nothing remarkable about the day—perhaps it was raining, perhaps merely cloudy. The general was getting on in years and looked benignly at Drogo through his monocle.

"I wanted to see you," he began as if it were he who had requested the interview, "I wanted to know how things are going up there. Filimore—how is he?"

"When I saw him last, your excellency, the colonel was in excellent health," Drogo replied.

The general was silent for a minute. Then he shook his head in a fatherly fashion. "Ah, you have been a trouble to us, you people up there in the Fort. Yes, yes, that affair over the boundary. There's no doubt about it, that story about the lieutenant—I've forgotten his name—displeased His Highness very much."

Drogo kept silence not knowing what to say.

"Yes, that lieutenant," the general went on to himself. "What is the name? A name like Arduino, I think."

"Angustina was his name, your excellency."

"Ah, yes, Angustina, a fine one he was. Endangering the boundary line through a piece of stupid obstinacy. I don't know how we. . . . Well, never mind," he concluded abruptly as if to show his magnanimity.

"But, your excellency, allow me," Drogo dared to observe. "But Angustina was the one who died."

"May be, very possibly, you may be right—I don't remember," said the

general as if it were a detail without the slightest importance. “But His Highness was most displeased, very much displeased.”

He said no more and looked at Drogo with a questioning air.

“So you have come,” he said, and his voice, which had a diplomatic ring, held a strong hint, “to be transferred to the city, haven’t you? You all have a craze for the city, and don’t realise that it is in the outposts that one learns to be a soldier.”

“Yes, your excellency,” said Giovanni Drogo, trying to control his words and the tone of his voice. “In fact I have done four years already.”

“Four years at your age! what are four years?” replied the general with a laugh. “However, I’m not reproaching you—I was merely saying that as a general tendency it is not perhaps the most likely to build up the morale of those in positions of command.”

He broke off as if he had lost the thread. He concentrated for a second then began again:

“However, my dear sir, I shall try to meet your wishes. Now we shall have your file brought in.”

As they waited for the documents the general reopened the conversation.

“The Fort,” he said, “Fort Bastiani, let’s see—do you know the weakness of Fort Bastiani?”

“I am not sure, your excellency,” said Drogo. “Perhaps it is a little too isolated.”

The general gave a brief pitying smile.

“What odd ideas you, young people have,” he said.

“A little too isolated. I must confess I would not have thought of that. The weakness of the Fort—do you want me to tell you what it is? It is that there are too many men there, too many men.”

“Too many men?”

“And that is why,” the general went on without remarking on the lieutenant’s interruption, “that is why it has been decided to alter the regulations. What are they saying about it, the people in the Fort?”

“About what, your excellency? Excuse me.”

“What we are talking about, of course. The new regulation, I told you,” the general repeated with annoyance.

“I haven’t heard about it, really I have not,” Drogo replied in astonishment.

“Ah, yes, perhaps the official announcement has not been made,” the general admitted more good naturedly. “But I thought you would have known just the same. Usually soldiers are experts at known things before other people.”

“A new regulation, your excellency?” Drogo asked curiously.

“A reduction in strength, the garrison out almost by half,” said the other

brusquely. "Too many men, I always said so. It needed thinning, that Fort."

At that moment the adjutant entered with a big bundle of files. Spreading them on a table he took one out, Giovanni Drogo's, and handed it to the general who ran a practised eye over it.

"Everything in order," he said. "But the request for transfer doesn't seem to be here."

"The request for transfer?" asked Drogo, "I did not think it was necessary after four years."

"Not usually," said the general, evidently annoyed at having to explain things to a subaltern. "But since this time there is such a large reduction in strength and everyone wants to leave, we must take them in order."

"But no one knows at the Fort, your excellency, no one has put in a request yet."

The general turned to the adjutant.

"Are there any requests for transfer from Fort Bastiani?" he asked him.

"About a score, I think, your excellency," replied the adjutant.

What a joke, thought Drogo completely overcome. His comrades had obviously kept it a secret so as to steal a march on him. Had even Ortiz deceived him so basely?

"Excuse me, your excellency, if I come back to the same point," Drogo found courage to say, knowing how much depended on it, "but it seems to me that the fact of having done four years' unbroken service should stand me more instead than a mere question of formal precedence."

"Your four years do not count for anything, my dear young man," replied the general coldly, and he seemed somewhat offended, "they do not count at all compared with many others who have been up there all their lives. I can consider your case with the utmost good will, I can further your legitimate ambitions, but I cannot do less than justice. And then each case must be taken on its merits."

Giovanni Drogo had turned pale.

"But then, your excellency," he asked almost stammering, "then I run the risk of staying up there all my life."

"Must be taken on its merits," the other continued imperturbably, and he went on turning over Drogo's documents. "I see here for example, it is right before my eyes, a reprimand. Now a reprimand is nothing very serious" (he went on reading) "but here is something rather unpleasant, it seems to me, a sentry killed by mistake."

"Unfortunately, your excellency, I did not . . ."

"I cannot listen to your excuses, you know that quite well, my dear young man," the general interrupted him. "I am only reading what is written on your

report, I even admit that it may have been pure accident, it can easily happen. But there are your colleagues who have managed to keep clear of such things. I am willing to do whatever I can, I have consented to receive, you personally, as you see, but now. . . . If only you had made the request a month ago. Odd that you didn't know. A very considerable disadvantage."

The good natured note struck at the beginning of the interview had disappeared. Now the general spoke with a slight suggestion of boredom and insolence, making his voice rise and fall. Drogo saw that he had made a fool of himself, saw that his comrades had fooled him, that the general must have a very mediocre impression of him and that there was nothing more to be done about it. The injustice of it gave him a burning sensation in his breast, over his heart. I could go away, resign my commission, he thought, after all I won't die of hunger and I am still young.

The general made a friendly gesture with his hand.

"Well, goodbye, lieutenant, and cheer up."

Drogo came to attention, clicked his heels, stepped backwards to the door and on the threshold gave a last salute.

XXI

A HORSE climbs up through the lonely valley and the noise of its hooves awakens a great echo in the silence of the ravines. The bushes high up on the rocks are motionless, the yellow grasses do not move, even the clouds pass through the sky with unusual slowness. The horse slowly climbs the white road—it is Giovanni Drogo returning.

There is no mistaking him—now that he has come closer you can recognise him easily and there is no particular sign of suffering in his face. So he has not rebelled, he has not resigned his commission, he has swallowed the injustice and is going back to his old post. At the bottom of his heart he is even pleased in a faint-hearted way at having avoided sudden changes in his mode of life, at being able to go back, as he was, to his old habits. He deludes himself, this Drogo, with the dream of a wonderful revenge at some remote date—he believes that he still has an immensity of time at his disposal. So he gives up the petty struggle of the day to day existence. The day will come, he thinks, when all accounts will be paid with interest. But in the meantime the others are overtaking him, they contend keenly with each other, they outstrip Drogo and have no thought for him. They leave him behind. He watches them disappear into the distance, perplexed, a prey to his usual doubts: perhaps he really has made a mistake? Perhaps he is an ordinary mortal for whom only a mediocre fate is reserved?

Giovanni was climbing up to the solitary Fort as on that September day, that distant day. Only this time there was no other officer coming up the other side of the valley and Captain Ortiz was not riding to meet him at the bridge, where the two roads joined.

This time Drogo rode on alone and meditated on life. He was going back to the Fort to remain there for what might be a long time at the very moment when many of his comrades were leaving it for ever. His comrades had been more wide awake, thought Drogo, but then they might also be better officers—that, too might be the explanation.

With the passage of time the Fort had lost its importance. Long ago it had perhaps been a key position or at least was considered such. Now, reduced to half strength, it was merely a road block, and as such not considered of strategic importance in any plan of Campaign. It was maintained solely so as not to leave

the frontier unmanned. The possibility of a threat from the northern steppe was not admitted—at most some nomad caravan might arrive at the pass. What would existence be like up there?

Meditating thus, in the course of the afternoon Drogo reached the edge of the highest plateau and found himself face to face with the Fort. It no longer contained the same disquietening secrets as it had the first time. In reality it was no more than a border barracks, a ridiculous fortress, the walls would stand up to guns of recent make for only a few hours. With time it would be allowed to go to ruin—already a piece of parapet had fallen here and there, and a platform had broken away, yet no one had it mended.

Such were Drogo's thoughts as he halted on the edge of the plateau and watched the usual sentries go up and down on the top of the walls. The flag on the roof hung limply, none of the chimneys smoked, there was not a soul to be seen on the bare expanse.

What a boring life it was going to be. Probably Morel, who was a cheerful soul, would be among the first to go and Drogo would be left without friends. Then there would be the usual guard duties, the usual games at cards, the usual jaunts to the nearest village to drink and make unexciting love. What a wretched existence, thought Drogo. And yet a last trace of enchantment hung over the outline of the yellow redoubts, some mystery persisted up there, in the angles of the earthworks, in the shadow of the casemates, forebodings such as could not be expressed in words.

At the Fort he found much changed. With so many departures at hand there was great excitement everywhere. They did not know yet who were due to go and the officers—almost all of them had asked for a transfer—lived in a state of anxious expectancy and forgot their former cares. Even Filimore, this was known for certain, was to leave the Fort and this helped to disturb the rhythm of routine duties. The feeling of restlessness had even spread to the soldiers since a large contingent, it was not yet fixed how many, was to go down to the plain. Guard duties were carried out with an ill will and when the time came for guard mounting they were often not ready; in everyone the conviction had grown that to take so many precautions was both stupid and useless.

It seemed obvious that their former hopes, their war-like dreams, their constant waiting for the enemy had been no more than a pretext to give life some significance. Now that it was possible to go back to human society all these seemed childish fancies and no one was willing to admit that he had believed in them, no one hesitated to laugh loud and long over them. The important thing was to leave the Fort. Each of Drogo's colleagues had used influential

friendships so as to be among those chosen; each one, in his heart, was convinced he had been successful.

“What about you?” they asked Giovanni with vague sympathy, those comrades who had kept the great news from him so as to steal a march on him and have one rival less. “What about you?” they asked.

“I shall probably have to stay here for a month or two,” replied Drogo. And the others hastened to encourage him—of course he would be transferred too, that was only just, he mustn’t be so pessimistic, and so on.

Of them all only Ortiz seemed to be unchanged. Ortiz had not asked to leave; for some years he had taken no further interest in the subject and the news that the garrison was being reduced reached him last; that was why he had not been able to warn Drogo. Ortiz watched the new wave of excitement indifferently—he devoted himself to the affairs of the Fort with his usual zeal.

At last the departures began in real earnest. In the courtyard there was a continual rumble of waggons loading stores and one by one the companies paraded to say farewell. Each time the colonel came down from his office to inspect them, he said a few parting words to the men; his voice was unmoving and lifeless.

Officers who had lived up there for years, who had gone on searching the solitary places of the north from the embrasures of the redoubts, who had been wont to carry on interminable discussions on whether there would be an unexpected enemy attack or not—many of these officers went off with a happy look on their faces, waving insolently to those of their comrades who had remained behind. So they rode off towards the valley, smart and upright in the saddle at the head of their troops, and did not even turn their heads to take a last look at their Fort.

But there was Morel who, as he drew up his platoon before the colonel in the centre of the courtyard one sunny morning and lowered his sabre in salute—there was Morel whose eyes shone with tears and whose voice trembled; but he was the only one. Leaning against a wall, Drogo watched the scene and gave a friendly smile to his comrade as he rode past towards the gate. Perhaps they were seeing each other for the last time and Giovanni raised his right hand to the peak of his cap in the regulation salute.

Then he went back into the passages of the Fort, which even in summer were cold and each day were becoming more and more deserted. At the thought of Morel’s departure the wound of the injustice he had suffered had reopened unexpectedly and caused him pain. Giovanni went in search of Ortiz and found him coming out of his office with a bundle of papers. Drogo caught up with him and walked at his side: “Good morning, sir.”

“Good morning, Drogo,” answered Major Ortiz and he halted. “Is there something new? Do you want anything?”

He wanted to ask him something. Solely as a matter of interest, but there was no urgency about it; yet it had been on his mind for some days.

“Pardon me, sir,” he said. “You remember, when I arrived at the Fort, four and a half years ago, Major Matti told me that only volunteers stayed here. That if any one wanted to leave he was free to do so. You remember I told you? According to Matti all I had to do was to ask to be medically inspected—simply to have a formal excuse—but he said it would have annoyed the colonel a bit.”

“Yes, I remember vaguely,” said Ortiz with a very faint suggestion of displeasure. “But you must excuse me, my dear Drogo, I . . .”

“One minute, sir. You remember that not to cause any unpleasantness I resigned myself to staying four months? But if I wanted I could leave, couldn’t I?”

“I know, my dear Drogo,” said Ortiz, “but you’re not the only one.”

“Then,” Giovanni interrupted him excitedly, “then these were all stories? then it is not true that I could go away if I wanted to? All stories to keep me quiet.”

“Oh,” said the major. “I don’t think so. You mustn’t get that into your head.”

“Don’t deny it, sir,” Giovanni replied. “Do you mean to tell me that Matti was telling the truth?”

“More or less the same thing happened to me,” said Ortiz, looking down in his embarrassment. “I used to have ideas about a brilliant career too.”

They were standing in one of the long corridors and their voices re-echoed sadly along the walls, for the place was empty and bare.

“So it is not true that all the officers came at their own request? They all had to stay here just like me, is that not the case?”

Ortiz said nothing and idly poked the point of his sabre into a crack in the floor. “So it was all nonsense when they said, some of them, that they wanted to stay here?” Drogo insisted. “But why did no one have the courage to say so?”

“Perhaps it is not quite as you say,” answered Ortiz. “There were one or two who really preferred to stay one—few, I admit, but there were some.”

“Who? Tell me who?” cried Drogo, then he broke off suddenly. “I beg your pardon, sir,” he added, “I was naturally not thinking of you—you know what happens when one is talking.”

Ortiz smiled.

“So, you didn’t mean me? Probably I stayed here too because it is my job.”

The two moved on, walking side by side, and passed the little barred oblongs of the windows; through them they saw the bare plateau behind the Fort, the mountains of the south, the heavy mists of the valley.

“So,” Drogo went on after a silence, “so all that excitement, these stories about the Tartars? So no one really hoped they were true?”

“They not only hoped!” said Ortiz. “They really believed.” Drogo shook his head.

“I don’t understand, I assure you I don’t.”

“What can I say?” said the major. “It’s a bit complicated. It’s a kind of exile up here—but you have to find some sort of outlet, you have to hope for something. Someone began thinking about it, then they began to talk about Tartars—who knows, who was the first?”

“Perhaps the place has something to do with it,” said Drogo, “seeing that desert.”

“Yes, the place, too, of course. That desert, the mists in the distance, the mountains, you can’t deny it. Yes, the place has something to do with it too.”

He was silent for a moment, thinking, then he resumed as if talking to himself.

“The Tartars, the Tartars. At first it sounds nonsense, naturally, then you end up by believing it yourself—at least a lot of people have, that’s a fact.”

“But sir, excuse me, do you . . .”

“It’s different with me,” said Ortiz, “I belong to another generation. I have no ideas about a career. A quiet job is enough for me. But you, lieutenant, you have all your life before you. In a year, a year and a half at the most, you will be transferred.”

“There’s Morel, lucky man,” exclaimed Drogo stopping at a window. There they saw the platoon marching off across the plateau. The soldiers stood out clearly against the bare, sunbeaten ground. They were laden with heavy packs yet they marched with a spring in their step.

XXII

THE last company to leave was drawn up in the courtyard. Everybody was thinking that next day they would begin to settle down to the new life with the reduced garrison. There was a sort of impatience to be done with these eternal goodbyes, the anger at seeing others leave. The company had been drawn up and they were waiting for Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolosi to inspect it when Giovanni Drogo, who was looking on, saw Lieutenant Simeoni appear with a strange look on his face.

Lieutenant Simeoni had been at the Fort for three years and seemed a good fellow, a little heavy, respectful of authority and fond of physical exercises. He advanced into the courtyard and looked about him with apparent anxiety, searching for someone to tell something to. Probably one person would do as well as another for he had no special friends.

He saw Drogo watching him and came up to him.

“Come and see this,” he asked in a low voice, “Come quickly and see.”

“See what?” asked Drogo.

“I am on duty on the third redoubt—I have come down for a moment. Come up as soon as you are free. There’s something I don’t understand.” And he panted a little as if he had been running.

“Where? What did you see?” asked Drogo, his interest awakened.

“Wait a moment,” said Simeoni, “wait till the company has moved off.”

At that moment a trumpet blew three notes and the soldiers came to attention, for the colonel had arrived—the colonel of a fort which had been reduced in rank.

“Wait until they are gone,” said Simeoni once more, for Drogo was becoming impatient at what appeared a pointless mystery. “I want to see them leave at least. I’ve been wanting to tell someone for five days but first they all had to leave.”

Finally, after Nicolosi’s few words and the last fanfares, the company marched heavily out of the Fort in full kit and made towards the valley. It was a September day—the sky was grey and sad.

Then Simeoni dragged Drogo through the long solitary corridors to the entrance of the third redoubt. They passed through the guard room and came out

on to the sentry-walk.

Lieutenant Simeoni pulled out a telescope and asked Drogo to look at the little triangle of plain the mountains disclosed.

“What is it?” asked Drogo.

“Take a look first—I don’t want to make a mistake. You look first and tell me if you see anything.”

Leaning his elbows on the parapet Drogo looked carefully at the desert through the telescope—it was Simeoni’s own—and clearly distinguished the stones, the folds in the ground, the thin clumps of arbutus, although they were all exceedingly far off.

Bit by bit Drogo swept the triangle of the desert and was about to say no, that he couldn’t see anything, when in the extreme distance, where everything faded into the curtain of mist, he seemed to see a little black dot moving.

He was still leaning on the parapet with his elbow and looking through the telescope when suddenly he felt his heart beat furiously. Like two years before, he thought, when they believed the enemy had arrived.

“Is it that little speck you mean?” asked Drogo,

“I’ve seen it for five days but I didn’t want to tell anyone.”

“Why?” said Drogo, “what were you frightened of?”

“If I said anything they might have stopped them from leaving. And so, after playing a dirty trick on us, Morel and the others would have stayed on and exploited the situation. The fewer we are, the better.”

“What situation? What do you think it is? It will be like last time—a reconnaissance patrol or shepherds maybe or simply an animal.”

“I’ve been watching it for five days,” said Simeoni, “if they were shepherds they would have gone away and the same if they were animals. There is something moving, but it stays more or less in the same spot.”

“Well, what do you think it is?”

Simeoni looked at Drogo with a smile as if wondering whether he could reveal the secret to him. Then he said:

“I think they are making a road, a military road. This is the real thing this time. Two years ago they came to study the ground. Now they are coming in real earnest.”

Drogo laughed heartily.

“But what sort of a road do you think they are making? You don’t really think anyone is going to come that way again? Didn’t you see enough last time?”

“Perhaps you are a little short-sighted,” said Simeoni. “Perhaps your eyes aren’t very good, but I can pick things out very well—they have begun to lay the foundations of the road. You could see it quite clearly yesterday when there was

sun.”

Drogo shook his head, amazed at such obstinacy. Was he really not tired of waiting, Simeoni? Was he really frightened to disclose his discovery as if it were a treasure? Was he really afraid they would take it from him?

“Once,” said Drogo, “once I would have believed it too. But now it looks to me, as if you were victim of an illusion. If I were you I should keep quiet about it; they’ll end up by laughing at you behind your back.”

“They are making a road,” retorted Simeoni, looking at Drogo pityingly. “Of course they will take months, but this time they mean business.”

“But suppose it were true,” said Drogo, “suppose it were as you say, do you think that if a road were really being built to bring guns down from the north—do you think they would have left the Fort stripped? The High Command would know at once, they would have known for years.”

“The High Command never takes Fort Bastiani seriously. No one will believe any of these stories until it has been bombarded. They will allow themselves to be convinced too late.”

“Say what you like,” repeated Drogo, “if that road were really being built the High Command would know all about it, you can be sure of that.”

“The High Command has a thousand sources of information—but only one out of a thousand is any good, so they do not believe any of them. Besides there’s no point in arguing, you’ll see that it will come about as I am saying.”

They were alone on the edge of the sentry-walk. The sentries, they were much further apart than once upon a time, were walking up and down on their beats. Drogo looked once more towards the north—the rocks, the desert, the mists in the distance, seemed senseless to him.

Later, speaking to Ortiz, Drogo learned that Lieutenant Simeoni’s famous secret was known to practically everyone. But no one had attached any importance to it. In fact many people were amazed that a serious young man like Simeoni should put about these new rumours.

In these days there were other things to think about. The reduction in the garrison’s strength obliged them to spread out the forces at their disposal along the top of the walls; they kept on experimenting in order to obtain, with smaller forces, a security system almost as effective as before. Some guards had to be abandoned altogether, others had to be given more equipment, the companies had to be reformed and distributed differently in the barrackrooms.

For the first time since it was built certain places in the Fort were shut and bolted. The tailor, Prosdocimo, had to get rid of three assistants because he had not sufficient work left. Every now and then one might walk into rooms or

offices which were completely empty, with white patches on the walls to show where furniture and pictures had been removed.

The little black speck moving about on the very limits of the plain continued to be regarded as a joke. There were not many people who allowed Simeoni to lend them the telescope so that they could see it and those few said they had seen nothing. Simeoni himself, since no one took him seriously, avoided speaking about his discovery and took care to laugh about it himself and not take offence.

Then one evening Simeoni came to Drogo's room and called him. Night had already fallen and the guard had been changed. The forlorn hope had returned from the New Redoubt and the Fort was preparing for the night watch—another night uselessly wasted.

"Come and see this—you don't believe it—but come and see this," said Simeoni. "Either I am having hallucinations or I can see a light."

They went to see what it was. They climbed to the top of the fourth redoubt. Drogo's companion handed him the telescope in the darkness and invited him to look.

"But it's dark," said Giovanni, "I can't see anything in the dark."

"Look I tell you," Simeoni insisted, "I told you I hope it isn't a hallucination. Look where I pointed to last time and tell me if you see anything."

Drogo raised the telescope to his right eye and pointed it towards the extreme north; in the darkness he saw a small light which appeared to gleam at the edge of the mists.

"A light," exclaimed Drogo. "I see a small light—wait" (and he went on adjusting the telescope), "I can't make out whether there is more than one—sometimes there seem to be two of them."

"You see?" said Simeoni triumphantly. "So I'm a fool, am I?"

"What has that got to do with it?" retorted Drogo without much conviction. "If there is a light what does it mean? It could be a gipsy encampment—or shepherds."

"It's the light of the store shed," said Simeoni, "the store shed for the new road, you'll see that I'm right."

Strangely enough the light could not be distinguished with the naked eye. Not even the sentries—and there were some wonderful ones among them, great hunters—could see anything.

Drogo levelled the telescope again, sought the distant light, stayed watching it for some moments then raised the instrument and began idly to observe the stars. Endless in number they filled every part of the sky, a sight of rare beauty. But in the east they were much more thinly scattered, for the moon was about to rise and a diffused light preceded it.

“Simeoni,” cried Drogo, for he could no longer see his companion at his side. But the other did not reply—he must have gone down by a narrow stair to inspect the ramparts.

Drogo looked about him. In the darkness he could see only the empty sentry-walk, the profile of the fortifications, the dark shadow of the mountains. The clock struck once or twice. At this moment the sentry on the extreme right should have given his nocturnal cry and the sound would have run along the ramparts from soldier to soldier. “Stand to, stand to,” Then the call would have turned back on itself, would have died away at the foot of the great cliffs. Now that the sentry posts were halved in number, thought Drogo, the call, being repeated less often, would have made the whole journey much more quickly. Instead the silence remained unbroken.

Then suddenly there came to Drogo’s mind thoughts of a distant desirable world: of a villa, for example, by the seashore on a soft summer night with charming and beautiful women sitting by his side while he listened to music—images of happiness which youth allowed one to dwell upon with impunity; and meantime in the east the distant rim of the sea would grow black and gleaming and the sky pale with the approaching dawn. To be able to squander the nights thus and not take refuge in sleep, to have no fear of being left behind, to let the sun rise and savour the thought of an infinity of time before one, the thought that there was no need to be miserly with it. Among all the wonderful things of this world Giovanni Drogo persisted in desiring this improbable mansion by the sea, the music, the careless squandering of time, the waiting for the dawn. However stupid it might appear, to him it seemed to express more intensely than anything else the peace he had lost. Because for some time a nagging anxiety which he could not comprehend, had been ceaselessly pursuing him, the feeling, namely, that he was being left behind, that something important would happen and take him unawares.

His talk with the general down in the city had left him with few hopes of a transfer and a brilliant career, but Giovanni knew he could not stay within the walls of the Fort all his life. Sooner or later he would have to make up his mind. Then the old habits caught him up again with the old rhythm and Drogo no longer thought of the others, of the comrades who had escaped in time, of his old friends grown rich and famous; he consoled himself with the sight of the officers who shared his exile; it never occurred to him that they might be the weak ones, the ones who had been beaten, the last people to take as an example.

From day to day Drogo postponed the decision; besides, he felt himself young still, newly twenty-five. Yet the subtle, worrying thought pursued him incessantly; and now there was the story of the light in the northern steppe,

Simeoni might even be right.

Hardly anyone talked about it in the Fort, as if it were a matter of no importance, one which could not concern them. Their disappointment that the war had failed to break out was still too near, although no one would have had the courage to confess it. Too fresh also was their disappointment at seeing their companions depart, at being left, a forgotten handful, to guard the useless walls. The reduction in the strength of the garrison had proved clearly that the High Command attached no further importance to Fort Bastiani. The dreams which once had come so readily and had been so eagerly desired were now angrily rejected. Simeoni, rather than be mocked, preferred to keep silence.

Besides, on the succeeding nights the mysterious light was no longer to be seen nor was any movement to be distinguished by day on the edge of the plain. Major Matti, who had climbed up to the top of the tower out of curiosity, made Simeoni give him the telescope and swept the desert in vain.

“Keep your telescope,” he said to Simeoni in an indifferent voice. “It might be a good idea if instead of wearing out your eyes uselessly you were to pay same attention to your men. I have seen a sentry without a bandolier. Go and have a look. It must be that one down there.”

With Matti there was Lieutenant Maderna who later told the story in the mess amidst roars of laughter. Nowadays their only thought was to pass the days as pleasantly as possible and the whole story of the north was forgotten.

It was only with Drogo that Simeoni continued to discuss the mystery. For four days indeed there had been no sign of lights or moving specks, but on the fifth they reappeared. The northern mists—this was Simeoni’s explanation at least—spread and withdrew according to the time of year, the wind and the temperature; in the last four days they had come further south, engulfing what he took to be the workshop.

Not only did the light reappear but about a week later Simeoni claimed that it had moved, advanced towards the Fort. This time Drogo objected—how was it possible in the dark and without any point of reference to demonstrate that there had been a movement of the kind, even supposing it had really taken place?

“There you are,” said Simeoni obstinately, “you admit then that if the light had moved it could not be definitely proved. So I have as much right to say that it has moved as you to say that it has stood still. In any case you’ll see. I’m going to watch these tiny moving specks every day. You’ll see that little by little they are coming nearer.”

The next day they began to watch together, taking turns at the telescope. In actual fact all they saw were three or four tiny dots moving with extreme

slowness. It was difficult even to see whether they were moving. One had to take two or three points of reference, the shadow of a boulder, the brow of a little hill, and work out the distances between them. In a few minutes time they saw that the proportions had altered. Which meant that the little speck had changed position.

It was extraordinary that Simeoni had been able to spot it the first time. Nor was it out of the question that the phenomenon had been going on for years or centuries—there might be a village there or a well beside which the caravans waited; and up to now no one at the Fort had used a telescope as strong as Simeoni's.

The movement of the specks was almost always to and fro along the same line. Simeoni thought they were carts carrying stones or gravel; the men, he said, would be too small to be seen at that distance.

Usually only three or four little specks were to be seen moving at the same time. Supposing they were carts, Simeoni argued, if there were three moving there must be at least six standing still, loading and unloading, and these six could not be picked out because they merged with the thousand other unmoving dots on the landscape. So on that stretch alone they were working with ten vehicles, probably with four horses each, which was normal for heavy hauls. The number of men, in proportion, must run into hundreds.

Such remarks, made at first almost as a sort of wager or as a joke, became the only thing of interest in Drogo's life. Although Simeoni was not particularly agreeable, being completely lacking in high spirits and pedantic in his conversation, in his free time Giovanni was almost always in his company and in the evening the two sat up late arguing in the anterooms.

Simeoni had already made an estimate. Even supposing the work went on very gradually and the distance was greater than was usually admitted, six months would be enough, he said, to bring the road within gunshot of the Fort. In all probability, he thought, the enemy would halt on the reverse slope of a ridge which ran across the desert.

Usually this ridge merged with the rest of the steppe, being identical in colour, but sometimes the evening shadows or the banks of mists revealed its presence. It fell away to the north, whether steeply or how far no one knew. The stretch of desert it hid from anyone looking from the New Redoubt was unknown from the walls of the Fort the ridge could not be seen because of the intervening mountains.

From the summit of the ridge to the foot of the mountains where the New Redoubt rose on its rocky com the desert stretched uniform and flat, interrupted only by an occasional fissure, by heaps of detritus, by narrow patches of cane.

When they had brought the road as far as the ridge, Simeoni anticipated, the enemy would be able to finish the remaining stretch almost in one spurt by taking advantage of a misty night. The ground was level and firm enough to allow even artillery to advance comfortably.

The six months he had allowed, the lieutenant added, could, of course, become seven or eight or even many more according to circumstances. And here Simeoni went over the possible reasons for delay—the existence, of other intervening valleys invisible from the New Redoubt, which would make the work longer and more difficult; a gradual falling off in the pace of the work as the Northerners get further away from their supply base; complications of a political nature which might make it advisable to suspend the work for a certain period; the snow, which might halt the work and even bring it to a complete standstill for two months or more; the rains transforming the plain into marsh. Such were the principal obstacles. Simeoni insisted on going over each one meticulously to show that he had an open mind.

And supposing the road served no aggressive ends? Suppose it were being built for some agricultural project, in order to cultivate the vast steppe which up to now had remained sterile and uninhabited? Or the work were simply to stop after two or three miles? asked Drogo.

Simeoni shook his head. The desert was too stony to be cultivated, he replied. Besides, the Northern Kingdom had immense deserted grasslands which served only for pasture; but on this side of the desert, he went on, the land would be considerably more suitable for such an undertaking.

But was it certain that they were really making a road? Simeoni assured him that on certain clear days, towards sunset, when the shadows were gradually lengthening, he had been able to make out the straight stretch of causeway. But Drogo had not seen it, although he had tried hard enough. Who could swear that that straight line was not merely a fold in the ground? The movement of the mysterious black specks and the light at night were no proof at all—perhaps they had always been there and in previous years perhaps no one had seen them because they had been hidden by mist, not to speak of the shortcomings of the old telescopes used in the Fort up to then.

While Drogo and Simeoni were arguing thus one day it began to snow. Summer isn't over yet, was Giovanni's first thought, and here the bad weather has come already. For it seemed hardly any time since he had come back from the city, that he had not even had time to settle down as before. And yet the calendar said the twenty-fifth of November—whole months had gone by.

Thick, thick snow fell from the sky and lay on the terraces and made them

white. As he looked at it Drogo felt his old worry more acutely than ever and sought in vain to dispel it by thinking of his youthfulness, of the number of years that lay before him. For some inexplicable reason time had begun to pass more and more quickly and engulfed the days one after another. You had barely time to look about and the night was falling, the sun was travelling below the horizon and would reappear in the opposite direction to illuminate the snow-clad world.

The others, his companions, did not seem to notice it. They carried out their usual duties without enthusiasm—in fact they became more cheerful when a new month appeared at the top of routine orders, they became more cheerful as if something had been gained. All the less time to pass at Fort Bastiani, they calculated. Thus they had a goal of their own, never mind whether petty or glorious, and they were content with it.

Major Ortiz himself, who was already getting on for fifty, apathetically watched the weeks and months race past. By now he had given up having great hopes. “Another ten years or so,” he said, “then I go on pension.” He would go back home to an old provincial town, he explained, where some of his people lived. Drogo looked at him with sympathy but without being able to understand him. What would Ortiz do down there among the townspeople, with nothing to live for, alone?

“I have learnt to accept things,” said the major, guessing Giovanni’s thoughts. “Year by year I have learned to want less. If I am lucky I shall go home with the rank of colonel.”

“And then?” asked Drogo.

“And then that is enough,” said Ortiz with a resigned smile. “Then I shall wait a little longer content to have done my duty,” he added jokingly.

“But here, at the Fort, in these ten years, don’t you think that—”

“That a war might come? Are you still thinking about a war? Haven’t we had enough of that?”

On the northern plain there was no longer anything suspicious to be seen on the fringe of the eternal mists; even the light had gone out. And Simeoni was delighted about it. This proved that he was right—it wasn’t a village nor yet a gipsy encampment, but merely some work in progress and the snow had interrupted it.

XXIII

IT was already some days since winter had descended on the Fort when something strange was to be read on the order of the day hanging in its little frame on a wall of the courtyard.

“Deplorable alarmist reports and false rumours,” it ran, “Acting upon precise instructions of the High Command, I recommend N.C.O.’s and men not to give credence to, repeat, or otherwise diffuse, alarmist rumours concerning what have been presumed to be threats of aggression against our borders. Such rumours are entirely without foundation. They may, besides being undesirable for obvious reasons of discipline, disturb normal good relations with our neighbouring state and spread amongst the troops an unnecessary state of tension which is harmful to the service. It is my wish that vigilance on the part of the sentries be exercised by the normal methods and that above all no recourse be made to optical instruments not contemplated in the regulations and which, if much used and used without judgment, easily give rise to errors and false conclusions. Any person in possession of such instruments must report to his unit commander who will take steps to withdraw the instruments and keep them in custody.”

There followed the normal orders for the daily guard duties and the signature of the commandant, Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolosi.

It was clear that the order of the day, although formally addressed to the men, was actually aimed at the officers. Nicolosi had thus achieved two things—he had hurt no one’s feelings and he had informed the whole Fort. Obviously no officer would any longer dare to be seen by the sentries scanning the desert with telescopes not of the regulation pattern. The instruments issued to the various redoubts were old, practically unusable; some had even been lost.

Who had informed on them? Who had warned the High Command down there in the city? They all instinctively thought of Matti—it could only have been he, the man who always had the regulations to hand to kill any pleasure, any attempt at relaxation.

Mostly the officers laughed about it. The High Command, they said, was up to its usual form, two years late. In any case who gave a thought to invasions from the north? Ah, yes, Drogo and Simeoni—they had forgotten about them. Yet it seemed incredible that the order should have been put up specially for

those two. A good chap like Drogo, they thought, was certainly incapable of endangering anyone even if he spent the whole day with a telescope in his hand. Simeoni, too, was judged to be harmless.

But Giovanni was instinctively convinced that the lieutenant-colonel's order was aimed at him personally. Once more things were working against him. What harm was there if he stayed an hour or two watching the desert? When he thought of it he felt a deep-seated anger grow within him. He was already prepared to await the spring. Once the snow had melted, he hoped the mysterious light would reappear in the extreme north, the little black specks would once more begin to move to and fro; faith would be reborn.

For all his emotions were centred round that hope and this time only Simeoni was on his side—the others did not give it a thought, not even Ortiz, nor yet the regimental tailor, Prosdocimo. It was fine now to be so alone, to guard their secrets jealously, not as in the days before Angustina died when they had all looked at each other like conspirators with a kind of eager rivalry.

But now the telescope had been forbidden. Being as scrupulous as he was, Simeoni would certainly no longer dare to use it. Even if the light burns once more on the edge of the eternal mists, even if the little specks begin to come and go once more, they will not know—no one could make it out with the naked eye, not even the best sentries, famous hunters who can see a raven almost a mile away.

That day Drogo was anxious to hear what Simeoni thought of things, but he waited until the evening so as not to attract attention; for someone would certainly have reported them immediately. Besides Simeoni had not come to the mess at midday and Giovanni had not seen him elsewhere.

At dinner Simeoni appeared, but later than usual, when Drogo had already begun his meal. He ate at great speed, rose before Giovanni and went straight off to the gaming table. Was he perhaps afraid to find himself alone with Drogo?

Neither of them was on duty that evening. Giovanni sat in an armchair beside the door of the anteroom so as to catch his companion as he went out. And he noted how, during the game, Simeoni cast fleeting sidelong glances at him and tried not to show it.

Simeoni played late, much later than usual; which he had never done before. He continued to throw glances towards the door and hoped that Drogo would have got tired of waiting. At last, when all the others had gone, he too had to rise and move towards the door. Drogo came up to him.

"Hello, Drogo," said Simeoni with an embarrassed smile. "I had not seen you, where were you?"

They had begun to walk along one of the innumerable dingy corridors which

ran lengthways through the Fort.

"I was sitting reading," said Drogo, "I didn't notice it was so late."

They walked in silence for a little in the light of the rare lanterns hung symmetrically on the walls. The other officers had already gone off together—they heard their voices come confusedly out of the far shadows. It was late and cold.

"Did you read orders?" said Drogo suddenly. "Did you see that about false alarms? I wonder why. And who do you think played informer?"

"How should I know?" Simeoni replied almost rudely, stopping at the foot of a flight of stairs. "Are you coming up this way?"

"And the telescope?" Drogo insisted. "We won't be able to use your telescope any more unless . . ."

"I've already handed it in," interrupted Simeoni solemnly. "It seemed the best thing to do. Specially since they had their eye on us."

"I think you could have waited a bit. In three months when the snow has gone I don't suppose anyone will give it a thought. We could watch again. The road you talk about—how will we see it without looking through your telescope?"

"Ah, the road," and there was a trace of feeling in Simeoni's voice. "But I ended up by being convinced that you were right."

"That I was right—how?"

"That they aren't making a road, it must be some village or other or a gipsy encampment as you said."

Then Simeoni was so afraid that he denied everything? For fear of trouble he did not even dare to speak to him, to Drogo. Giovanni looked his companion in the face. The corridor was now completely deserted, no voice was to be heard; the wavering shadows of the two officers were projected monstrosly on either side.

"So you don't believe in it anymore?" asked Drogo. "Do you really think you were mistaken? And what about all your calculations?"

"They were only to pass the time," said Simeoni, trying to turn it all into a joke. "I hope you didn't take me seriously."

"Tell the truth—you're frightened," said Drogo with an angry voice. "Tell the truth—it was on Orders and now you don't dare."

"I don't know what's wrong with you this evening," answered Simeoni. "I don't know what to say to you. It's impossible to have a joke with you, that's what it is, you take everything seriously—you're like a child, that's what you are."

Drogo said nothing and stood looking at him. They remained for a few seconds without speaking, alone in the gloomy corridor; but the silence was too

much for them.

“Well, I’m going to bed,” said Simeoni finally, “good night.”

And he went off up the stairs which were lit on each landing by a dim lantern. Simeoni climbed the first flight and disappeared round a corner; only his shadow was to be seen on the wall, then not even that. What a louse, thought Drogo.

XXIV

MEANWHILE time was slipping past, beating life out silently and with ever increasing speed; there is no time to halt even for a second, not even for a glance behind. "Stop, stop," one feels like crying, but then one sees it is useless. Everything goes by—men, the seasons, the clouds, and there is no use clinging to the stones, no use fighting it out on some rock in mid-stream; the tired fingers open, the arms fall back inertly and you are still dragged into the river, the river which seems to flow so slowly yet never stops.

From day to day Drogo felt the mysterious flood grow stronger and sought in vain to hold it back. He had no points of reference in the unvarying life of the Fort and the hours slipped away from him before he could count them.

Then there was the secret hope whereby Drogo looked forward to what should be the best part of his life. In order to nurse it he sacrificed month upon month without a thought; yet that was still not enough. The winter, the long winter at the Fort, was only a sort of mortgage on his hopes. The winter ended and Drogo still waited.

When the good weather came, he thought, the Northerners would resume work on the road. But there was no longer Simeoni's telescope for him to see them with. Yet as the work went on—but who knew how long that would yet take?—the Northerners would be drawing nearer and one fine day would come within range of the old telescopes which were still issued to some of the guards.

So Drogo had not fixed the term of his waiting in the spring but some months later, always assuming that a road was indeed being built. And all such thoughts he had to brood over in secret, for Simeoni, being afraid of unpleasantnesses, wanted to hear no more of them; his other comrades would have made a joke of it and his superiors frowned on such fantasies.

At the beginning of May, however much he scanned the plain with the best of the regulation telescopes, Giovanni did not succeed in discovering any sign of human activity, not even the light in the dark, and yet how easily fires can be seen even at immense distances; Little by little his hopes grew fainter. It is difficult to believe in a thing when one is alone and there is no one to speak to. It was at this period that Drogo realised how far apart men are whatever their affection for each other, that if you suffer the pain is yours and yours alone, no

one else can take upon himself the least part of it; that if you suffer it does not mean that others feel pain even though their love is great: hence the loneliness of life.

Hope began to wane and impatience grew in Drogo as he heard the strokes of the clock crowd upon each other. He had already reached the point where he let whole days go past without even glancing to the north, although sometimes he liked to pretend to himself that he had forgotten, whereas in reality he did it on purpose so that next time his chances might be a shade better.

At last one evening—but what a long time it had been—a little trembling light appeared in the lens of the telescope, a weak, light which seemed to flicker on the point of death but which must be, if you worked out the distance, of a respectable size.

It was the night of the seventh of July. For years Drogo remembered the marvellous joy which flooded his heart and his desire to run and shout so that everyone might know of it and the pride with which he struggled to tell no one because of a superstitious fear that the light might die.

Every evening Drogo stood and waited on the top of the walls, every evening the light appeared to come a little nearer and grow bigger. Often it must have been an illusion born of his longing but at other times there was a real advance, until at last a sentry descried it with his naked eye.

Then even by day they began to see against the whitish background of the desert a movement of little black specks, just as the year before, only now the telescope was less powerful and so the Northerners must have drawn much nearer.

In September the light of what they took to be the workshop was picked out on clear nights even by people with average sight. Little by little among the garrison the talk began once more of the northern steppe, of the foreign troops, of the strange movements and the lights by night. Many of them said that it really was a road—although they could not say what it was for—the theory that it was a military undertaking seemed absurd. Besides the work seemed to proceed with extraordinary slowness compared with the huge distance still to be covered.

Yet one evening there was vague talk of war and strange hopes began once more to eddy to and fro within the walls of the Fort.

XXV

LITTLE more than half a mile from the Fort a stake has been planted on the crest of the escarpment which runs across the northern steppe. From there the desert stretches to the rocky cone of the New Redoubt, even and compact enough for the artillery to advance freely. A stake has been thrust into the summit of the feature—a strange sign of human activity—easily visible with the naked eye from the summit of the New Redoubt.

That is the point the Northerners have reached with their road. The great work is finished at last, but at what a terrible price. Lieutenant Simeoni had made a forecast, had said six months. But six months had not been enough for the building of it, not six months nor yet eight nor ten. Now the road is finished and the enemy convoys can descend from the north at the gallop and so reach the walls of the Fort; after that there is only the last stretch to cross, a few hundreds of yards of smooth and easy going, but it has all cost them dearly. Fifteen years it took—fifteen long, long years, and yet they have passed like a dream.

A glance around one and nothing seems changed. The mountains are unchanged; on, the walls in the Fort the same stains are to be seen—there will be a few new ones but not of any size. The sky is the same, the same the Tartar steppe (if one disregards that dark stake on the edge of the escarpment and a long straight strip which one can or cannot see according to the light—and that is the famous road).

Fifteen years have meant less than nothing to the mountains and have not even done much harm to the bastions of the Fort. But for the men it has been a long road although they do not quite understand how it passed so quickly. The faces are still the same—more or less; the customs have not changed nor the guard duties nor the things the officers talk about every evening.

And yet if one looks closely the marks of the years can be seen in their faces. And then the garrison has been still further reduced in numbers—long stretches of wall are no longer occupied and one can come up to them without any password. The groups of sentries are distributed only among the essential points; it has even been decided to close down the New Redoubt and only to send a picket there every ten days on a tour of inspection. So small is the importance the High Command now attaches to Fort Bastiani.

Indeed the construction of the road on the northern plain has not been taken seriously by the General Staff. Some people say that it is one of the usual eccentricities of military headquarters; others say that in the capital they must be better informed, obviously the evidence goes to show that the road serves no aggressive aims. Besides there is no other explanation to hand even if it is not very convincing.

Life at the Fort has become more monotonous and solitary; Lieutenant-Colonel Nicolosi, Major Monti, Lieutenant-Colonel Matti have retired on pension. The garrison is now commanded by Lieutenant-Colonel Ortiz and all the others, too, except the regimental tailor, Prosdocimo, who has remained a sergeant-major, have risen in rank.

One wonderful morning—it is September once more—Drogo, Captain Giovanni Drogo, is riding up the steep road which leads from the plain to Fort Bastiani. He has had a month's leave, but he is coming back after twenty days; the city has by now become completely foreign to him—his old friends have made careers for themselves, occupy important positions and greet him hastily as if he were an officer like any other. Even his house, which Drogo still loves, fills him with an indefinable pain each time he returns to it. The house is almost always deserted, his mother's room is empty forever, his brothers are constantly away from home; one has married and lives in another city, another still travels; there are no more signs of family life in the living rooms, voices re-echo absurdly and it is not enough to open the windows and let in the sun. So once more Drogo is climbing up the valley to the Fort and he has fifteen years fewer to live. Yet he does not feel that he has changed particularly; time has slipped by so quickly that his heart has not had a chance to grow old. And although the mysterious tumult of the passing hours grows with each day, Drogo perseveres in his illusion that the really important things of life are still before him. Giovanni patiently awaits his hour, the hour which has never come; he does not see that the future has grown terribly short, that it is no longer like in the days when time to come could seem an immense period, an inexhaustible fund of riches to be squandered without risk.

And yet one day he noticed that he no longer went riding on the level ground behind the Fort. In fact he noticed that he had no desire to do so and that in recent months—but since when exactly—he no longer ran up the stairs two at a time. This is silly, he thought; physically he felt himself unchanged, everything was going to make a fresh start, of that there was not the least doubt. It was quite unnecessary and ridiculous to require proof of it.

No, physically Drogo has not deteriorated. If he started riding again and running up the stairs two at a time he could easily do it—but that is not what is

important. The serious thing is that he no longer feels any desire to do so, that after lunch he prefers to stay dozing in the sun rather than gallop about on the stony plateau. That is what matters, that is the only sign of the passage of the years.

If only he had thought of it the first evening he took the stairs one at a time. He felt a little tired, it is true; there seemed to be an iron band round his head, and he had no desire for the usual game of cards; besides, on previous occasions, too, he had refrained from running up the stairs because of some passing ailment. He had not the slightest suspicion that that evening was a very sad occasion for him, that on these very stairs, at that very moment, his youth was ending, that the next day, for no particular reason, he would not go back to the old ways nor the day after, nor yet later on. Never.

And now as Drogo rides up in the sunlight and meditates, and the horse, already a little tired, goes at a walk, a voice calls him from the other side of the valley.

“Captain,” he hears it call and turning round sees on the other side of the gorge a young officer on horseback. He did not recognise him but he seemed to make out the badges of rank of a lieutenant and thought it must be another officer from the Fort returning like himself from leave.

“What is it?” asked Giovanni, and stopped; but first, as regulations required, he returned the other’s salute. What reason could that lieutenant have for calling him in this somewhat easy-going manner.

The other did not reply, and “What is it?” Drogo repeated more loudly; this time with a trace of annoyance.

Upright in his saddle the unknown lieutenant put his hands to his mouth, and replied with the full force of his lungs:

“Nothing, I wanted to say ‘Good day’ to you.”

To Giovanni it seemed a stupid explanation, almost offensive and savouring of a joke. Half an hour’s ride to the bridge and then the two roads met. So what need was there for this unmilitary display of spirits?

“Who are you?” Drogo called back.

“Lieutenant Moro,” was the reply, or rather such was the name the captain seemed to hear. Lieutenant Moro? he asked himself. There was no one at the Fort with a name like that. Was it perhaps a new subaltern coming to take up his duties?

It was only then that it struck him, awakening sorrowful chords in his heart—the memory of that far distant day when he had climbed up to the Fort for the first time, of his meeting with Captain Ortiz at the very same point in the valley,

of his urge to speak with some friendly person, of the embarrassing dialogue across the ravine.

Exactly as on that day, he thought—with this difference, that the roles were changed and now it was he, Drogo, the old captain who rode up to Fort Bastiani for the hundredth time while the new lieutenant was a certain Moro, someone he did not know. Then Drogo realised that in the meantime an entire generation had been used up, that he had now passed the peak of life, belonged with the old men, where it had seemed to him Ortiz belonged on that distant day. And Giovanni—past forty, having done nothing remarkable, with no children, really alone in the world—Giovanni looked around in dismay and felt that his destiny was running out.

He saw boulders encrusted with bushes, wet watercourses, distant naked crests piled one above the other in the sky, the impassible face of the mountains—and on the other side of the valley that new lieutenant, timid and far from home, who deluded himself that he would of course not stay at the Fort more than a few months and dreamt of a brilliant career, glorious feats of arms, romantic loves.

He clapped his horse's neck with one hand and the animal turned its head in a friendly way, but could not naturally understand him. A noose tightened round Drogo's heart—farewell to the dreams of those far off days, farewell the good things of life. Bright and friendly the sun shone upon mankind, an invigorating breeze came down the valley, the meadows gave off a sweet smell, the voices of the birds accompanied the music of the torrent. A day for happiness, thought Drogo, and was amazed that there was no apparent difference from certain wonderful mornings in his youth. The horse set off again. Half an hour later Drogo saw the bridge where the roads met, thought that soon he would have to begin to speak to the new lieutenant and the thought hurt him.

XXVI

WHY, now that the road was finished, had the Northerners disappeared? Why had men, horses and wagons gone back across the great plain, back into the mists of the north? Was all that work for nothing? Yet the squads of pioneers were seen going off one by one until once more they became tiny specks visible only through the telescope as they had been fifteen years before. The way lay open for the fighting men, should the army now advance to the assault on Fort Bastiani.

But there was no sign of the advancing army. There remained only the stretch of road running across the Tartar steppe—a strange man-made mark in the ancient wilderness. The army did not come on to the assault; everything seemed left in suspense; but who knew for how long?

Thus the plain remained unaltered, the northern mists did not shift and the life of the Fort stayed as before with all its regulations; the sentries still went on pacing out the same number of steps from one point to another of the sentry-walk, the men's soup was the same, one day identical with another, repeating the same thing over and over again like a soldier marking time. And yet the winds of time were blowing; heedless of mankind they blew to and fro in the world preying upon beauty; and no one could escape them, not even children so newly born as to be still unnamed.

Giovanni's face, too, began to be covered with wrinkles, his hair became grey, his step heavier; the torrent of life had now thrown him to one side, towards the swirling backwaters, although he was after all only fifty. Naturally Drogo no longer did guard duty, but he had an office in headquarters company next to Lieutenant-Colonel Ortiz.

When darkness fell the scant number of men on guard no longer sufficed to prevent the night from becoming master of the Fort. Huge stretches of wall were unwatched and there the thoughts that come with the dark, the sad thoughts of lonely men, made their breach. For the old Fort was like a lonely island surrounded by uninhabited wastes—to right and left were the mountains, to the south the long uninhabited valley and in the opposite direction the Tartar steppe. Strange noises, noises never heard before, re-echoed at dead of night through the labyrinths of the Fort and the sentries' hearts began to beat. The cry of "Stand

to!” still ran from one end of the walls to the other, but the soldiers had to make a great effort to pass it on, so far apart were they.

About this time Drogo was a spectator of Lieutenant Moro’s first troubles—it was like a faithful reproduction of his own youth. Moro, too, had at first been terrified, had gone to Major Simeoni (who, as it were, took Matti’s place), had been persuaded to stay for four months and had finally remained caught like a limed bird. Moro, too, had begun to look too fixedly towards the north and the new unused road along which his soldier’s hopes came marching on. Drogo would have liked to speak to him, to tell him to be on his guard, to go away while there was still time; all the more so since Moro was a nice, conscientious boy. But something stupid always intervened and prevented them from talking and it would in any case probably have been pointless.

One after another the pages turned—the grey pages of the days, the black pages of the nights, and both Drogo and Ortiz (and perhaps some of the other senior officers) felt a growing anxiety that they might no longer have enough time left. Insensible to the wasting power of the years the Northerners made no move, as if they were immortal and it meant nothing to them if they gambled away whole seasons. But the Fort contained poor mortal men, with no defence against the work of time and their final term was upon them. Points in time which had once seemed unreal, so distant were they, now suddenly appeared on the nearby horizon and brought to mind how ruthlessly time strikes its balances. Each time, if one were to go on, one had to work out a new system, find new terms of reference, console oneself with the thought of others still worse off.

At last even Ortiz had to retire on pension and on the northern steppe there was not the least sign of life, not yet the tiniest light. Lieutenant-Colonel Ortiz handed over to Simeoni, the new commandant, paraded the troops in the courtyard—except of course the detachments on guard duties—got through a speech with difficulty, mounted on to his own horse with the help of his batman and rode out of the gate of the Fort. A lieutenant and two soldiers were his escort.

Drogo accompanied him to the edge of the plateau where they said goodbye. It was the morning of a long fine summer’s day; the clouds passing through the sky made a strange pattern on the landscape. Ortiz dismounted and stood with Drogo a little apart from the others; neither spoke for they did not know how they should say farewell. Then forced and banal words came to their lips, so different from what was in their hearts and so much poorer.

“Life will be different for me now,” said Drogo. “I almost wish I was leaving. I almost feel like resigning my commission.”

“You are still young,” said Ortiz. “It would be a silly thing to do—you still

have time.”

“Time for what?”

“Time for the war. You’ll see—it won’t be more than two years.” So he said, but in his heart he hoped it might not be so; in actual fact he hoped that like himself Drogo would leave without having had that great good fortune. It would have seemed an injustice. And yet he counted Drogo his friend and wished him well.

But Giovanni did not say anything.

“You’ll see it won’t be more than two years, that’s a fact,” Ortiz insisted, in the hope of being contradicted.

“Two years!” said Drogo at last. “Centuries will pass and it will still not come. The road has been abandoned and no one will ever come from the north.” But although this was what he said, the voice in his heart spoke differently; for there still lived on within him that deep-rooted presentiment of great events, an obscure conviction that the prime of life was still to come, a relic of his youth, absurd and undaunted by the years.

They fell silent again, for they saw that the subject was raising a barrier between them. But what could they say, they who had lived together almost thirty years between the same walls and with the same dreams? After all that way together their two roads were now going apart—one in one direction, one in another—leading on to unknown territories.

“What wonderful sunshine,” said Ortiz, and looked at the walls of his Fort, of the Fort he was leaving for ever; his eyes were a little dimmed with age. They seemed to be unchanged, the walls of the same yellowish colour, with the same romantic aspect. Ortiz looked at them intensely and only Drogo could have guessed how much he suffered.

“Yes, it is hot,” replied Giovanni, and remembered Maria Vescovi, that far off conversation in the drawing room and the melancholy falling chords of the piano.

“A hot day, that’s a fact,” added Ortiz, and the two smiled to each other, an instinctive sign of understanding as if to say that they knew perfectly the meaning of these stupid words. Now a cloud had touched them with its shadow and for a minute or two the whole plateau was darkened; the Fort, in contrast, still lay in the sun and gleamed with sinister splendour. Two great birds wheeled over the first redoubt. Far off, almost imperceptible, there was the sound of a trumpet.

“Did you hear? the trumpet,” said the old officer.

“No, I didn’t hear,” Drogo lied in reply with a vague feeling that he was thereby pleasing his friend.

“Perhaps I’m mistaken. In fact we are too far off,” Ortiz admitted, his voice trembling, then he added with difficulty: “Do you remember the first time, when you arrived here and you were afraid? You didn’t want to stay, you remember?”

“A long time ago,” was all Drogo could say, for a strange knot had tightened round his throat.

Then Ortiz, who had been following his own thoughts, said something else: “Who knows?” he said, “perhaps I might be some use if there was a war. Maybe I wouldn’t. Perhaps in a war—but otherwise no use at all; that we have all seen.”

The cloud had passed over, had passed over the Fort and now was sliding across the desolation of the Tartar Steppe, moving silently north. Twenty yards off the horses of Ortiz and his escort beat their hooves on the stones to show their impatience.

XXVII

ANOTHER page turns, the months and the years go by. Drogo's schoolmates are almost tired of work, they have grey square-cut beards, they walk composedly through the city and people salute them respectfully. Their sons are grown men; some of them are grandfathers. Drogo's friends like to linger at the door of the houses they have built themselves and, content with the career they have made, to watch the river of life; they amuse themselves by picking out their sons among the whirling multitude and encouraging them to hurry, to outstrip the others, and arrive first at the goal. But Giovanni Drogo still waits, although hope grows feebler from moment to moment.

Now he has changed at last. He is fifty-four, has the rank of major and is second in command of the scanty garrison of the Fort. Up to a little time ago he had not changed much, he might still be called young. Every now and again he rode about a little for his health's sake on the plateau; but it was an effort.

Then he began to grow thinner, his face became a sad yellow colour, the muscles slackened. Liver trouble, said Doctor Rovina, who is now exceedingly old and determined to end his life up there. But Rovina's powders had no effect. In the morning Giovanni awoke with a disheartening feeling of fatigue; then he sat in his office and could scarcely wait for the evening to arrive so that he might throw himself into an easy chair or on to his bed. Liver trouble aggravated by general exhaustion, said the medical officer, but exhaustion was very odd with the life Giovanni led. However, it was something that would pass off, and common at that age—said Rovina—a little tedious perhaps but with no danger of complications.

Thus a further reason for waiting became engrafted on to Drogo's life—his hope of recovery. Otherwise he showed no sign of impatience. The northern steppe was still empty; nothing pointed to a possible enemy advance.

"You are looking better," his colleagues told him almost every day, but in reality Drogo did not feel the slightest improvement. Admittedly the earlier headaches and painful attacks of diarrhoea had disappeared. No specific ailment tortured him. But in general his energies were flagging.

Simeoni, the commandant of the Fort, said to him: "Take some leave. Have a rest. It would do you good to go to somewhere by the sea." And since Drogo

said no, he felt better already, he preferred to stay on, Simeoni would shake his head reprovingly as if Giovanni were ungratefully refusing valuable advice, advice which not only was in the spirit of the regulations but to his own personal advantage and in the interests of the efficient running of the garrison. For Simeoni made his own virtuous perfection such a burden to the others that he had contrived to make them lament Matti's going.

Whatever the topic, what he said, and it was superficially extremely cordial, had always a vague flavour of reproof, as if he were the only one to do his duty to the last, the only support of the Fort, the only one who thought of dealing with the innumerable troubles which would otherwise have brought everything to wrack and ruin. Matti too, in his day, had been a little like this, but less hypocritical; Matti had made no secret of the barrenness of his own heart and some of his pitiless coarseness had been not displeasing to the men.

Fortunately Drogo had struck up a friendship with Doctor Rovina and had gained his complicity in his effort to stay on. A vague superstitious feeling told him that if he now left the Fort because of illness he would never return. The thought pained him. Admittedly thirty years ago he had wanted to leave, to take his place in the smooth and brilliant life of the garrison towns with summer manoeuvres, musketry practice, horse racing, theatres, social events, beautiful women. But now what would be left for him? There were only a few years to go until he was retired on pension, his career was finished, at the most they might give him a job on some headquarters so that he could serve out his time. He had only a few years left—his last reserve—and perhaps before they came to an end the long hoped-for event might come. He had thrown away the good years, now he at least wanted to wait on until the last.

To hasten his recovery Rovina advised Drogo to spend all day in bed and to have anything he had to attend to brought to his room. This happened one cold and rainy March which brought with it great and unusual avalanches among the mountains; whole peaks crumbled for reasons unknown and shattered themselves in the abysses; for hour upon hour sad voices resounded through the night.

At last with extreme slowness the good weather began to appear. The snow had melted in the pass but wet mists lingered over the Fort. It needed a strong sun to dispel them, for the air of the valleys was heavy from the winter. But, waking one morning, Drogo saw a fine strip of sunlight glowing on the floor and felt that spring had come.

He gave himself up to the hope that with the fine days there would be a corresponding quickening in himself. Even in the ancient beams there awoke in spring-time a vestige of life—hence the innumerable creakings which fill the

spring nights. Everything seems to begin anew—a rush of health and joy floods the world.

Drogo dwelt on the thought intensely, recalling to mind what great writers had said on the subject and so sought to convince himself. Rising from his bed he walked swaying to the window. His head began to whirl but he consoled himself with the thought that it always happens so when one gets up after many days in bed, even if one is quite better. And in fact the giddiness disappeared and Drogo could look out upon the brilliance of the sun.

Limitless joy seemed to be radiated throughout the world. Drogo could not confirm this directly because there was a wall in front of him; but he could easily guess it. Even the old walls, the reddish earth of the courtyard, the benches of discoloured wood, an empty crate, a soldier walking slowly past—all of them seemed happy. So what must it be like out there, beyond the walls?

He was tempted to get dressed, to sit in the open in an easy-chair and take the sun, but a barely perceptible shiver frightened him and hinted that he should go back to bed. “But I’m feeling better today, really better,” he thought, and was convinced that he was being honest with himself.

Quietly, overwhelmingly, the spring morning came on and the streak of sunlight moved across the floor. Drogo watched it from time to time and had no inclination to examine the notebooks piled up on the table by his bed. There was besides an extraordinary silence which was immune to the infrequent bugle calls and the dripping in the cistern. Even after his promotion to major, Drogo had not felt like changing his room—he almost seemed to be afraid that it would have brought him bad luck; but by now the sighing of the cistern had become a deep rooted habit and no longer disturbed him.

Drogo was watching a fly which had come to rest on the ground right on the streak of sunlight, an odd thing to see at that time of year, making him wonder how it had survived the winter. He was watching it walk cautiously about when someone knocked at the door.

It was not the usual knock, Giovanni noted. It certainly was not his batman, nor Captain Corradi who always asked permission to come in, nor any of the other regular visitors. “Come in,” said Drogo.

The door opened and in came the old regimental tailor, Prosdocimo; he was all bent now and wore a strange garb which must once have been a sergeant-major’s uniform. He came forward, panting a little, and with the first finger of his right hand pointed to something beyond the wall.

“They are coming, they are coming,” he whispered loudly, as if it were a great secret.

“Who are coming?” said Drogo, astonished to see the tailor so possessed. I must watch out, he thought, this chap will begin to talk and talk and he’ll go on for an hour at least.

“They’re coming along the road, God willing, along the road from the north.”

“Along the road from the north? Soldiers?”

“Battalions of them, whole battalions,” the old man shouted, quite beside himself and clenching his fists. “This time there is no mistake, and then a letter has come from the High Command to advise us that they are sending reinforcements. It is war, it is war,” he kept on crying, and it was hard to tell whether he was not a little afraid.

“Can you see them already?” asked Drogo. “Can you see them even without a telescope?” He had sat up in bed and a great uneasiness had come over him.

“By God you can. You can see the guns—they have counted eighteen of them.”

“And when will they be able to attack? How long will they take?”

“Ah, with the road they won’t take long—I say they’ll be here in two days, two days at the most.” Damn this bed, said Drogo to himself, here I am tied down by my illness. It had never even entered his head that Prosdocimo had invented it; he had suddenly felt that it was all true, he had noticed that even the air seemed different, the air and the light of the sun.

“Prosdocimo,” he said, breathing heavily, “go and call my batman, Luca, for me. There’s no use ringing the bell, he must be down in the senior officers’ mess waiting for papers. Be quick, please.”

“Right away, sir,” said Prosdocimo eagerly, as he went off. “Forget about your ailments, come up on the walls, too, and see.”

He went out rapidly, forgetting to close the door; his steps could be heard disappearing along the corridor and then the silence returned.

Dear God, make me feel better, I entreat you, if only for a week, whispered Drogo, unable to stem the wave of excitement. He wanted to get up at once, at all costs. To go right out on to the walls, show himself to Simeoni and make him understand that he was there, that he was at his post, that he would resume his responsibilities as usual as if he had never been ill.

There was a bang—a draught in the corridor slammed the door to. In the great silence the noise had a loud and sinister echo like an answer to Drogo’s prayer. Why was Luca not coming, how long would that dolt take to climb two flights of stairs?

Without waiting for him Drogo got out of bed and was seized by a wave of giddiness; but slowly it passed away. Now he was in front of the mirror and looked with horror at his own yellow, worn face. It is my beard that makes me

look like this, he tried to tell himself; and with uncertain steps, still in his nightgown, he wandered round the room looking for a razor. But why did Luca not make up his mind to come?

The wind banged the door once more. The devil take it, said Drogo, and moved to shut it. At that moment he heard his batman's step drawing near.

Shaved and dressed with care—but the uniform was too big for him and he seemed to sway about within it—Major Drogo left his room and started off along the corridor; it seemed much longer than usual. Luca was at his side, a little behind him, ready to support him because he saw that the officer could barely stand on his feet. Now the waves of giddiness returned suddenly and irregularly; each time Drogo had to stop and lean against the wall. I am too excited, I am strung up as usual, he thought, but on the whole I feel better.

And in fact the giddiness passed and Drogo reached the uppermost terrace of the Fort where, through the telescope, various officers were scanning the triangle of steppe left exposed by the mountains. Giovanni was dazzled by the full brightness of the sun, for he was no longer used to it and replied in some confusion to the greetings of the officers. It seemed to him, but perhaps it was merely his own sour interpretation, that the subalterns saluted him with a certain casualness as if he were no longer their direct superior, in a sense the arbiter of their daily lives. Did they think he was already written off the strength?

The unpleasant thought lasted only for a moment, for his main preoccupation returned: the idea of war. First of all Drogo saw a thin column of smoke rising from the summit of the New Redoubt, so the guard had been posted there once more, emergency measures had already been taken, the command was already functioning—but no one had consulted him who was second in command. They had not even given him warning—on the contrary. If Prosdocimo had not come to call him on his own initiative Drogo would still have been in bed, unconscious of the threat.

He had a fit of burning, bitter anger; a veil came over his eyes; he had to lean on the parapet of the terrace and, as he did so, gripped himself with all his power so that the others should not see the state to which he was reduced. He felt terribly alone, among enemies. Of course there were one or two young lieutenants like Moro who were fond of him, but what use was their support to him?

At that moment he heard a voice calling them to attention. With hasty steps Colonel Simeoni walked through them, his face red.

"I have been looking for you everywhere for half an hour," he exclaimed to Drogo. "I was at my wits' end. We must make some decisions."

He approached him with excessive cordiality, knitting his brows, as if he were extremely worried and anxious for Drogo's advice. Giovanni felt himself disarmed, his anger was suddenly extinguished, although he was fully aware that Simeoni was deceiving him. Simeoni had imagined that Drogo could not move any more, had paid no more attention to him, had taken decisions on his own, although of course he would tell him when everything had been done. Then they had told him that Drogo was walking about the Fort and he had run looking for him, eager to prove his good faith.

"I have a message here from General Stazzi," said Simeoni, anticipating all Drogo's questions and drawing him aside so that the others could not hear. "Two regiments are arriving, do you understand? And where shall I put them?"

"Two regiments of reinforcements," said Drogo in amazement.

Simeoni gave him the message. The general announced that as a security measure, since possible provocations were feared, two regiments, the 17th of Foot together with another which was forming, and a group of light artillery had been sent to reinforce the garrison at the earliest possible moment; guard duties should be resumed at the old strength, making use, that is, of the whole force available; quarters should be prepared for the officers and men. Part of them would naturally be under canvas.

"In the meantime I have sent a platoon to the New Redoubt—that was right, wasn't it?" added Simeoni, without giving Drogo time to reply. "Have you seen them yet?"

"Yes, yes, that was right," replied Giovanni with an effort. Simeoni's words struck his ears as unreal, disconnected; things around him swayed to and fro disagreeably. Drogo felt ill, a cruel feeling of exhaustion had suddenly overcome him; all his will power was concentrated in the single effort to stay on his feet. Oh God, oh God, he prayed mentally, give me some help.

To conceal his collapse he asked for a telescope—it was the famous one belonging to Simeoni—and began to look north, leaning his elbows on the parapet, which helped him to keep on his feet. If only the enemy had waited a little, a week would have been enough for him to recover; they had waited so many years, could they not have waited another few days, only a few days?

Through the telescope he looked at the visible triangle of desert; he hoped he might not see anything, that the road would be deserted, that there would be no sign of life. That was what Drogo hoped for after wasting his whole life waiting for the enemy.

He hoped he would not see anything, and instead a black line ran obliquely across the whitish background of the plain and that line was moving, a dense mass of men and conveyances coming on towards the Fort. These were not the same

scanty files as in the days when they had marked off the frontier. It was the Northern army at last, and perhaps—

At this point Drogo saw the image in the telescope begin to rotate like a vortex, grow darker and darker and then plunge into night. As he fainted he fell limply on to the parapet like a puppet. Simeoni caught him in time; as he supported the body—life seemed to have drained from it—he felt through the cloth the lean framework of the bones.

XXVIII

A DAY and a night passed and Major Drogo lay in bed; now and again there reached him the rhythmic drip of the cistern but no other noise, although throughout the Fort anxiety and excitement grew from minute to minute. Cut off from everything, Drogo lay and listened to his own body, trying to hear whether his lost strength would ever return. Rovina had told him that it would be a question of only a few days. But of how many? When the enemy arrived would he be able to get on to his feet at least, dress, drag himself on to the roof of the Fort? Now and again he rose from his bed; each time he seemed to feel a little better, he walked without support as far as the mirror, but here the sinister image of his own face, it was growing more and more ashen and gaunt, extinguished his new hopes. His head swirled and a mist rose up before him, then he went swaying back to his bed, cursing the doctor for not curing him.

The streak of sunlight on the floor had already swung far round—it must be eleven at least; unusual voices were rising from the courtyard and Drogo was lying motionless when Lieutenant-Colonel Simeoni, Commandant of the Fort, entered.

“How are you?” he asked in a cheerful voice. “A bit better? But you’re very pale, you know.”

“I know,” said Drogo coldly. “Have they advanced from the north?”

“I should say so,” said Simeoni. “The artillery is on the crest of the ridge already and now they are siting the guns. You must forgive me for not coming, but it has become an inferno here. This afternoon the first reinforcements are arriving—I’ve only had five minutes free now.”

“Tomorrow I hope to get up,” said Drogo, and was amazed to hear his own voice tremble, “I shall be able to help you a little.”

“Oh no, no, you mustn’t think of it. Think about getting better and don’t think I have forgotten you. In fact I have good news for you—today a wonderful carriage will come and fetch you. War or no war one’s friends come first,” he dared to say.

“A carriage to fetch me? Why to fetch me?”

“To come and take you away, of course. You don’t want to stay in this wretched room for ever. In the city they’ll look after you better—in a month

you'll be yourself again. And don't worry about us here, everything is ready now."

A great flood of anger choked Drogo's breast. Were they going to chase him away now that the war was coming at last, after he had thrown away the best of life waiting for the enemy, after he had lived on that one hope for more than thirty years?

"You might at least have asked me," he replied with a voice shaking with anger. "I won't move, I want to stay here—I'm not as ill as you think—I shall get up tomorrow."

"For goodness' sake don't get excited—we won't do anything. If you make yourself excited you will get worse still," said Simeoni with a forced smile of comprehension. "It was only that to me it seemed better, and Rovina says so too."

"What about Rovina? Did Rovina tell you to send for the carriage?"

"No, no, no one said anything to Rovina about the carriage. But he says you could do with a change of air."

Then Drogo thought he would speak to Simeoni as a true friend, and open his heart to him as he would have done to Ortiz; after all Simeoni was a man too.

"Listen, Simeoni," he began tentatively, changing tone, "you know that up here at the Fort we all stayed on in the hope—it's difficult to say, but you know what I mean," he simply could not express himself, for how can you make a man like that understand certain things? "If there had not been that chance..."

"I don't understand," said Simeoni with obvious distaste. (Was Drogo going to become sentimental into the bargain? he thought. Had the illness brought him down to that extent?)

"But you must understand," Giovanni insisted. "I have been waiting here for more than thirty years, I have let a lot of chances go by. Thirty years is a fair time, all spent waiting for the enemy. You can't try to tell me now—you can't try to tell me now to go away, you can't do it—it seems to me I have a certain right to stay."

"All right," responded Simeoni with irritation. "I thought I was doing you a favour and you answer me like that. I shouldn't have bothered. I sent two despatch riders on purpose. I specially held up a troop of guns to let the carriage past."

"But I'm not blaming you at all," said Drogo. "I'm grateful to you, I know you meant it well." (Oh how it hurt, he thought, to have to keep on good terms with this fellow.) "Besides, the carriage can stay here—at present I'm not even in a condition to make a journey like that," he added incautiously.

"A little while ago you were saying you would get up tomorrow, and now you

say you can't even get into a carriage. I'm sorry, but you don't know yourself what you want."

Drogo tried to put things right.

"Not at all. A journey like that and a walk to the end of the sentry's beat are quite different things. I can have a bench brought out and sit down if I feel weak," he was going to say 'a chair' but that might have sounded silly. "From there I can keep an eye on the men, I can at least see."

"All right, stay then," said Simeoni, as if he were closing the discussion, "but I don't know where I am going to make the officers sleep, the ones who are going to arrive; I can't put them in the corridors or, in the cellars. There could be three beds in this room."

Drogo looked at him icily. So that was what Simeoni was getting at? He wanted to send him away to have a room free. Was that all? And then he talked of solicitude and friendship. I should have seen that from the beginning, thought Drogo, it was what you would expect from a bastard like that.

Seeing that Drogo said nothing Simeoni took heart and went on:

"There could be three beds in this room easily. Two along that wall and the third in the corner. You see? Drogo, if you listen to me," he went on very clearly and distinctly but without the least human feeling, "if you listen to me you'll make things easier for me, while if you stay here—don't mind if I say so—I don't see what use you can be in the state you are in."

"All right," interrupted Giovanni, "I understand. That's enough, for goodness' sake, I have a sore head."

"I'm sorry," said the other, "I'm sorry to keep on but I want to settle this right away. The carriage is on its way. Rovina thinks you should go. Here there would be a room free. You will get better more quickly, and then—if I keep you here, a sick man, I am taking a fine responsibility on myself if anything unfortunate happens. You are obliging me to assume a fine responsibility, I tell you that frankly."

"Listen," replied Drogo, although he saw how absurd it was to fight on; meantime he gazed at the streak of sunlight which was climbing up the wooden wainscotting, and as it climbed it slanted and stretched out. "I'm sorry if I say no. But I prefer to stay here. You won't have any trouble, I assure you; if you like I shall make a written statement. Go on, Simeoni, leave me in peace—perhaps I haven't long to live, let me stay here. I have been sleeping in this room for more than thirty years."

The other said nothing for a moment; he looked contemptuously at his sick colleague, gave an unpleasant smile and then asked with a different voice: "And suppose I ask you as your superior officer? If it were an order I was giving you,

what would you say then?” and here he made a pause as if relishing the effect he had produced. “This time, my dear Drogo, you are not showing your usual military spirit, I’m sorry to have to tell you, but in the end you’ll go away all right. There is no telling what the change will do for you. I can see that you don’t like it, but you can’t have everything in this life, you have to listen to reason—now I shall send you your batman to get your things ready. The carriage should be here by two. I’ll see you again later.”

With these words he hurried off, deliberately so as not to give Drogo a chance to make further objections. He shut the door in great haste and walked quickly away along the corridor as if he were pleased with himself and complete master of the situation.

The silence which remained was oppressive. There was a noise of water dripping in the cistern behind the wall. Then in the room one could only hear Drogo’s heavy breathing; it sounded almost like a sob. And outside the day was in its prime; even the stones were growing warm; from far off there came the unvarying noise of the waters falling over the precipitous cliff-faces; the enemy was massing behind the last ridge in full view of the Fort while along the road over the steppe troops and transport still came on. On the ramparts of the Fort everything is ready; the ammunition as it should be, the men well prepared, the arms seen to. All eyes are turned towards the north, even if they can see nothing because of the intervening mountains; for it is only from the New Redoubt that everything can be seen. Thus once more as in the far off days when the Northerners arrived to mark off the frontier there is the same state of suspension, between gusts of fear and joy. But no one has the time to remember Drogo who is dressing with Luca’s help and preparing to leave.

XXIX

IT had to be admitted that it was a handsome carriage, even too much so for those country roads. But for the regimental coat-of-arms on the doors it might have been taken for the carriage of some rich gentleman. On top there sat two soldiers, the coachman and Drogo's batman.

In the midst of all the confusion at the Fort (the first detachments of reinforcements were already arriving) no one paid much attention to a thin officer with a drawn and yellowish face who came slowly down the stairs and, making towards the door, went out to where the carriage stood.

At that moment a long column of troops, mules and horses was to be seen coming from the valley and advancing over the sun-lit plateau. Although they were tired with their forced march, the soldiers quickened their pace as they came nearer to the Fort, and the band, at the head of the column, were seen to draw the grey cloth coverings from their instruments as if they were preparing to play.

Meanwhile one or two people saluted Drogo, but not many, and not as they had used to do. Apparently they all knew that he was on the point of leaving and that from now on he counted for nothing in the hierarchy of the Fort. Lieutenant Moro and one or two others came to wish him a good journey, but it was the briefest of salutations with that vague, undefined affection which the young have for the older generation. One of them said that Lieutenant-Colonel Simeoni begged him to delay his departure; he was extremely occupied at the moment; would Major Drogo be so good as to wait for a minute or two—the commandant would come without fail.

But when he had climbed into the carriage Drogo at once gave the order to drive off. He had made them lower the hood to let him breathe better and had wrapped round his legs two or three dark-coloured blankets on which his sabre gleamed.

Rocking on the stones the carriage went off across the stony plateau; thus Drogo's road took its last turning. Sitting sideways on the seat, his head nodding with each jolt of the wheels, Drogo gazed at the yellow walls of the Fort and saw them sink lower and lower.

Up there he had lived his life, cut off from the world; he had undergone thirty

years of torture merely waiting for the enemy, and now that they were arriving he was being chased away. But his comrades, the others down there in the city, had had an easy, happy life; now with a proud disdainful smile they had reached the goal and reaped the rewards of glory.

Drogo's eyes gazed as never before at the yellowish walls of the Fort, the geometrical outlines of the casemates and magazines. Slow, bitter, bitter tears ran down over his wrinkled skin; everything was ending miserably; there was nothing further to be said.

There was nothing, nothing at all in Drogo's favour; he was alone in the world, sick, and they had chased him away like a leper. He cursed them over and over again. But it was better to let things go, not to think any more; otherwise an unbearable flood of anger swelled in his breast.

The sun was already on its downward path although it had still some way to go; the two soldiers on the boot were chatting quietly, indifferent whether they stayed or went. They had taken life as it came without worrying themselves with stupid thoughts. The carriage—it was wonderfully built, a real sick man's carriage—swayed like a delicate balance at each pothole. And the Fort (and with it the whole panorama) grew smaller and lower, although its walls gleamed strangely in that spring afternoon.

The last time very likely, thought Drogo when the carriage reached the edge of the plateau where the road began to dip down into the valley. Goodbye, Fort Bastiani, he said to himself. But Drogo was a little dazed and did not even have the courage to stop the horses to give another look at the old keep, which after all these centuries was only now about to begin its true life.

For a moment longer the image of the yellowish walls, the slanting bastions, the mysterious redoubts, the cliffs on either side black with the thaw, remained in Drogo's eyes. It seemed to Giovanni—but it was for an infinitely short instant of time—that the walls suddenly soared up towards the sky, gleaming with light; then everything was brutally hidden as the road plunged between the grass-grown rocks.

Towards five o'clock they reached a little inn where the road ran along the side of the ravine. Overhead there rose, like a mirage, chaotic crests covered with grass and red earth, desolate hills where no man had perhaps ever been. In the depths ran the stream.

The carriage drew up on the little space before the inn at the very moment when a rifle battalion was passing. Drogo saw on either side young faces, red with sweat and exertion, their eyes gazing at him in astonishment. Only the officers saluted him. He heard a voice coming from those who had passed: "He

travels in comfort, the old boy.” But no laughter followed. While they went on into battle he went down to the inglorious plain. What a fool of an officer, the soldiers probably thought—but perhaps they had read in his face that he too was going to his death.

He could not shake off a slight sensation of dullness, a sort of mist; perhaps it had been the swaying of the carriage, perhaps his illness, perhaps simply his suffering at seeing his life end so miserably. Nothing mattered any more to him, absolutely nothing. The idea of going back to his city, of wandering with dragging steps through the old deserted house or of lying in bed for long boring, solitary months frightened him. He was in no hurry to arrive. He decided to pass the night in the inn.

He waited until the whole battalion had passed, until the dust raised by the soldiers had settled behind them again, and the rumble of their wagons had been drowned by the voice of the stream. Then he climbed slowly out of the carriage, leaning on Luca’s shoulder.

There was a woman sitting on the doorstep busy with her knitting; at her feet a child slept in a rude cradle. Drogo looked with astonishment at that wonderful sleep, so different from that of grown men, so light and so deep. In this being no disturbed dreams had yet come to life, its little soul went on its way without a care, without desires or remorse, and the air was pure and very still. Drogo stood motionless gazing at the sleeping child; an acute feeling of sadness entered his heart. He tried to imagine himself deep in sleep, a strange Drogo whom he had never known; He tried to imagine how his own body looked, sleeping like a beast, worn by obscure exertions, his breathing heavy, his mouth falling half-open. And yet one day he had slept like that child, he too had been a thing of grace and innocence, and perhaps an old, sick officer had stopped to look at him with bitter astonishment. Poor Drogo, he said to himself, and realised how weak he was; but he after all was alone and no one loved him except himself.

XXX

HE was sitting in his bedroom in a wide easy-chair; it was an evening so splendid that it brought in at the window a perfumed air. Drogo looked listlessly at the sky which was becoming more and more blue, at the violet shadows in the deep valley, at the crests still bathed in sunlight. The Fort was a long way off, even the mountains around it could no longer be seen.

It must have been a happy evening even for men of moderate good fortune. Giovanni thought of the city in the dusk, the sweet unrests of the new season, young couples in the avenues along the river, the windows already lit and issuing from them the chords of a piano, the whistle of a distant train. He imagined the bivouac fires of the enemy in the heart of the northern steppe, the lanterns of the Fort swaying in the wind, the wonderful sleepless night before the battle. Himself excepted, everyone had some reason for hope, however small.

Below him in the common room a man had begun to sing and another joined him, singing a folksong of some sort about love. In the zenith, where the blue was deepest, shone three or four stars. Drogo was alone in the room, the batman had gone down to drink a glass; suspicious shadows began to gather in the corners and under the furniture. For a moment Giovanni seemed to give way—after all no one could see him, no one in the world would know; for an instant Major Drogo felt that the great load on his heart was about to dissolve in tears.

It was then that from somewhere deep down there emerged a new thought, clear and terrible: the thought of death.

He felt as if the flight of time had stopped, as though a spell had been broken. Lately the whirling motion had grown; then suddenly it stepped altogether; the world lay horizontal, listless, apathetic, and the watches ran vainly on. Drogo's road had come to its end; there he is now on the lonely shore of a grey, monotonous sea, and around him there is neither house nor tree nor human beings and so it has been since time immemorial.

From the furthest horizon he felt a shadow advance upon him, growing darker as it came, closing around him; perhaps it was a question of weeks or months, but even weeks or months are as nothing when they separate us from death. So life had been reduced to a kind of game; everything had been lost for a bet made in a moment of pride.

Outside, the sky had become intensely blue, but in the west a band of light remained above the violet outlines of the mountains. And the dark had come into the room; one could distinguish only the threatening outlines of the furniture, the whiteness of the bed, Drogo's gleaming sabre. He would, he realised, never move from here.

As he sat thus, surrounded by the dark (below they sang on sweetly to the chords of a guitar) Giovanni Drogo felt a last hope come to life within him. This man, sick and alone in the world, rejected from the Fort as a tiresome burden, this man who had been outstripped by everyone, timid and weak as he was, dared to imagine that everything was not finished, because perhaps his great moment had come, the decisive battle which might make his whole life worthwhile.

Yes, the last enemy was advancing against Giovanni Drogo. Not men like himself and like him tortured by desires and sufferings, with flesh that one could wound, with faces one could look into, but a being at once malignant and omnipotent; there would be no fighting on the ramparts among the noise of the explosions and huzzas with a blue spring sky overhead, no friends at his side so that, seeing them, his heart would be cheered, no bitter reek of powder and gunshot, no promises of glory. It will happen in a room in an unknown inn, by the light of a candle, in the bleakest solitude. This is not a fight from which one returns one sunny morning, crowned with flowers amid smiling girls. There is no one to watch; no one to say: Well done.

Oh this is a much harder battle than the one he once hoped for. Even veterans would prefer not to venture on it. Because it may be fine to die in the open, with one's body still young and healthy amidst the triumphant echoes of the bugles; but it is a sadder fate to die of wounds in a hospital ward after long sufferings, and it is more melancholy still to meet one's end in one's bed at home in the midst of fond laments, dim lights and medicine bottles. But nothing is more difficult than to die in some strange, indifferent spot, in the characterless bed of an inn, to die there old and worn and leave no one behind in the world.

Be brave, Drogo, this is the last card—go on to death like a soldier and let your bungled life at least have a good end. Take your revenge at last on fate—no one will sing your praises, no one will call you hero or anything of the kind; but for once it is worth the effort. Step across the shadow line with a firm step, erect as if on parade and even smile, if you can. After all, your conscience does not weigh on you too much and God will doubtless pardon you.

So Giovanni said to himself, in a kind of prayer, and he felt the last circle of life draw in around him. And from the bitter depths of the past, of his broken desires, of the injuries he had suffered, there arose such strength as he would not

have dared to hope for. With inexpressible joy Giovanni Drogo suddenly was aware that he was absolutely calm, almost eager to put himself once more to the test. So you cannot expect everything from life? So that was it, Simeoni? Now Drogo will show you.

Be brave, Drogo. And he tried to make an effort, to hold out, to jest with the terrible thought. He put his whole heart into it, with a desperate recklessness, as if he were advancing to the assault alone against an army. And suddenly the ancient terrors fell away, the nightmares faded, death lost its icy aspect and became something simple and natural. Major Giovanni Drogo, worn with illness and the years, a poor mortal, thrust against the great black gateway and saw the doors fall apart leaving the way clear to the light.

Then he saw how unimportant it had been to wear himself out on the ramparts of the Fort, to scan the desolate northern steppe, to strive after a career, to wait such long years. There was no need even to envy Angustina. Admittedly Angustina had died on a mountain crest in the heart of the tempest and had gone on his way true to himself, and with great style indeed. But it was much harder to die a hero's death in Drogo's state, eaten by disease, exiled from strangers.

One thing only made him unhappy—that he should have to depart with this miserable body of his, with its protruding bones, its sallow, flaccid skin. Angustina had died with his body still intact, thought Giovanni, and his image, in spite of the years, had remained that of a tall, delicate youth, with a handsome face pleasing to women: that was his privilege. But once the dark threshold was crossed, might not Drogo, too, become as he had been before: not handsome, for handsome he had never been, but fresh with the freshness of youth. How wonderful, said Drogo to himself as he thought of it—like a child, for he felt strangely free and happy.

But then it crossed his mind to ask: suppose it were all a deception? suppose his courage was only a kind of intoxication? suppose it had merely something to do with the wonderful sunset, the scented air, the temporary relief from physical pain, the singing on the floor below? and suppose in a few minutes, in an hour, he were once more to be the other Drogo, weak and beaten?

No, don't think about it, Drogo, don't torture yourself anymore; the worst is over now. Even if pain assails you once more, even if there will be no more music to comfort you and instead of this finest of evenings noisome mists arise, it will come to the same in the end. The worst is over and they cannot cheat you anymore.

The room has filled with darkness; only with difficulty can one see the white of the bed and all the rest is black. Soon the moon should rise.

Will Drogo manage to see it or will he have to go before then? The door of

the room shakes and creaks slightly. Perhaps it is a breath of wind, merely the air swirling a little as it does on these restless spring nights. But perhaps it is she who has come in with her silent step and now is standing by Drogo's chair. Giovanni makes an effort and straightens his shoulders a little; he puts right the collar of his uniform with one hand and takes one more look out of the window, the briefest of glances, his last share of the stars. Then in the dark he smiles, although there is no one to see him.